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THE SOLITUDE OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU

BY

MARK ALBERT VAN DOREN

A. B. University of Illinois, 1914.

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

IN ENGLISH

IN

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

OF THE

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

1915





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UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

June 3 1905

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

*Mark Albert Van Doren*

ENTITLED *The Solitude Of Henry David Thoreau*

BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF *Master of Arts*

*Stuart P. Sherman*

In Charge of Major Work

*Stuart P. Sherman*

Head of Department

Recommendation concurred in:

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

} Committee  
on  
Final Examination



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I.

BIOGRAPHICAL TABLE

- 1817 Born at Concord, Massachusetts, July 12.
- 1823 Lived for a year in Boston; in school there.
- 1823-1833 Attended Grammar School and Academy in Concord. Studied Greek.
- 1827 Called "The Judge"; said to have "the firmness of the Indian".
- 1833-1837 At Harvard.
- 1834 Emerson's first lecture at Concord.
- 1836 Emerson's "Nature" published.
- 1837 Met Emerson.
- 1837 The Journal begun.
- 1837 "Sic Vita".
- 1837-1838 Taught school with brother John in Concord.
- 1838 First lecture ( on Society) in Concord.
- 1838 Trip to Maine after a teaching position.
- 1838 Seceded from Dr. Ripley's congregation.
- 1839 Canoe trip on the Concord and Merrimack.
- 1840 Admitted into Transcendental circle.
- 1840-1843 Contributed to the Dial.
- 1841 The Service.
- 1842 Visits to Hawthorne.
- 1842 Death of brother John.
- 1841-1843 Lived in Emerson's household.
- 1843 Tutored on Staten Island.
- 1843 Met Horace Greeley.
- 1843 Visited Brook Farm.
- 1845-1847 Residence at Walden.



## II.

- 1845        Jailed for refusing to pay taxes.
- 1846        First trip to the Maine Woods.
- 1847        Made collections for Agassiz.
- 1847-1848   Second residence in Emerson's household.
- 1849        The Week.
- 1849        Visit to Cape Cod.
- 1850        Through French Canada with Elley<sup>~</sup><sub>^</sub> Channing.
- 1850        Second Visit to Cape Cod.
- 1852        Met Clough.
- 1853        Second trip to the Maine Woods.
- 1853        Aids fugitive slaves.
- 1854        Walden published.
- 1854-1855   Fr<sup>e</sup>indship with Cholmondeley.
- 1855        Cholmondeley's gift of Oriental books.
- 1855        Third Visit to Cape Cod.
- 1856        Visited Whitman.
- 1857        Third trip to the Maine Woods.
- 1857        Fourth trip to Cape Cod.
- 1857        Met John Brown.
- 1858        Trip to the White Mountains.
- 1860        Trip to Mt. Monadnock -- caught a fatal cold.
- 1860        John Brown papers.
- 1861        To Minnesota and return.
- 1862        Died in Concord, May 6.





I.

CHRONOLOGY OF THOREAU'S WRITINGS.

1835-1837 College essays (quoted in Sanborn's Life, pp. 150-163.)

1840-1843 Contributions to the Dial.

Vol. 1, 1840 - Sympathy.

- Aulus Persu<sup>u</sup>s Flaccus.

- Stanzas, "Nature doth have her dawn".

Vol. 2, 1841 - Sic Vita.

- Friendship, "Let such pure hate."

Vol. 3, 1842 - Natural History of Massachusetts.

- ("Excursions")

- "Great God, I ask thee for no meaner pelf."

- "Be sure your fate,"

- The Inward Morning, "Packed in my mind lie  
all the clothes."

- "My love must be as free,"

- "In vain I see the morning rise,"

- Rumours from an Aeolian Harp.

- The Moon.

- To the Maiden in the East.

- The Summer Rain.

- The Laws of Menu, selected by Thoreau.

- The Prometheus Bound of Aesclylus (trans-  
lation)

- Anacreon, eleven poems translated.

- Sayings of Confucius.

- To a Stray Fowl.

- Orphics: Smoke; Haze.



## II.

- Dark Ages.
- Friendship. From Chaucer.
- Vol. 4, 1843 - Ethnical Scriptures. Chinese Four Books.
- A Winter Walk ("Excursions")
- Homer, Ossian, Chaucer.
- Pindar, note and translations.
- The Preaching of Buddha.
- Ethnical Scriptures. Hermes Trismegistus.
- Herald of Freedom.
- Fragments of Pindar.
- 1840 The Service (not printed until 1902).
- 1843 A walk to Wachusett. ("Excursions").
- 1843 The Landlord ("Excursions").
- 1843 Paradise (to be) Regained.
- 1845 Wendell Phillips before the Concord Lyceum.
- 1845 Thomas Carlyle and his Works.
- 1845 Ktaadn and the Maine Woods.
- 1849 Civil Disobedience.
- 1849 A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.
- 1853-1855 Canadian papers.
- 1854 Slavery in Massachusetts.
- 1854 Walden.
- 1855 Cape Cod papers.
- 1858 Chesuncook.
- 1859 Plea for Captain John Brown.
- 1860 Last Days of John Brown.
- 1860 After the Death of John Brown





### III.

- |      |   |  |
|------|---|--|
| 1860 | The Succession of Forest Trees ("Excursions")               | } (Taken from<br>earlier work<br>of the Journal<br>1850 <u>et seq.</u> ) |
| 1862 | Walking ("Excursions")                                      |  |
| 1862 | Autumnal Tints ("Excursions")                               |  |
| 1862 | Wild Apples ("Excursions")                                  |  |
| 1863 | <u>Excursions.</u>  |  |
| 1863 | Life without Principle.                                     |  |
| 1863 | Night and Moonlight ("Excursions")                          |  |
| 1864 | <u>The Maine Woods.</u>                                     |  |
| 1865 | <u>Cape Cod.</u>  |  |
| 1865 | Letters (Emerson's Selection)                               |  |
| 1881 | A Yankee in Canada.   |  |
| 1881 | Spring  | } Selections from the Journal.   |
| 1884 | Summer  |  |
| 1888 | Winter  |  |
| 1892 | Autumn  |  |
| 1894 | <u>Miscellanies.</u>  |  |
| 1894 | Familiar Letters (Sanborn's Selection)                      |  |
| 1906 | The Complete Journal (vols. 7 to 20 of the Walden Edition). |  |



## I. SOLITUDE.

A scholar could do the republic of letters some service by furnishing a History of Solitude. An inquiry into the springs of solitary aspiration, and a comparative review of individuals or schools who have launched their souls on lone ways, might both illuminate certain compartments in human nature and palliate the eccentricity of this or that individual solitary. Cheered by a cloud of sympathetic witnesses, and supported by a corpus of philosophic testimony gathered out of India, Greece and Rome, out of monastery, garden and study, Diogenes, the Buddha, Plotinus, Horace, St. Augustine, the garden poet, the epicurean recluse, the German romanticist, or the American transcendentalist could be sure that nothing was to be extenuated, nor ought set down in malice, but that his contribution (if he made any) to the history of the human spirit was to be taken at its proper value.

The solitude of Henry David Thoreau, American transcendentalist, the only out-and-out eccentric among American writers of the first rank, has found many ardent commentators -- stabbing assailants like Lowell<sup>1</sup> and Stevenson<sup>2</sup> or complete panegyrists like Emerson<sup>3</sup> and the biographers<sup>4</sup> -- but few critics. An attack or a defense in the twentieth century would be an anachronism. Thoreau, who walked the world awhile, numbering sharp intellects, is now seldom exclaimed at. We have only to explain him; and now that the quintessential expression of his solitude, Walden, has become a familiar and fascinating

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1- My Study Windows.

2- Familiar Studies of Men and Books.

3- Biographical introduction to Excursions.

4- See Bibliography. They will be called hereafter: Sanborn, Salt, Channing, and Japp.



classic; now that the whole of his work (with the Journal in fourteen volumes) is satisfactorily printed,<sup>1</sup> an examination of the whole secret of his solitude, with an estimate of its significance, is in order.

It is commonplace to observe that Thoreau, as citizen, as friend, and as naturalist, pushed farther in towards the center of solitude than has any kindred lonely spirit. But the whole of his motive, and precisely the peculiar qualities of his program, have not been set off for scrutiny.

Bacon<sup>2</sup> quotes a speech: "Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god". Thoreau hints now and then that he feels himself in the company of gods; certainly his approach to the arcanum of solitude betrays the worshipper more than does the behavior of any lonely predecessor or contemporary. The slender musing of William Drummond in Hawthornden; the jaunty salute of Cotton and Walton,

"Farewell, thou busy world, and may

We never meet again";

the gentlemanly retreat of Cowley; the Horatian pose of Pope; the hermitage of the eighteenth century sentimentalist; the plaintive self-assurance of Shelley, "a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds"; the mellow confidence of Wordsworth in his mountain surroundings; the pugnacity of Lander, who strove with none for none was worth the strife; the quiz-zical fancy of Hazlitt for "living to one's-self"; the terrible nakedness of Carlyle at 23, wandering over the moors like a restless

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1- Walden Edition, N. Y., 1906. 20 volumes.

2- "Of Friendship".





spirit; the mock-bravery of Browning, hoisting the soul amid infinite din on its lone way; the wretched conviction of Galsworthy that privilege separates a man forever from his fellows; none of these has either the quiet relentlessness of Thoreau's passion, or the salt of his irony. Nor does the sense of futility of Arnold haunt Thoreau as it haunted most men of letters in the nineteenth century; Thoreau never shrank from his metaphysics *before the world*.

In America the long tradition of Puritan and Quaker inward awe, the stoicism of Bryant, and the lonely forest heroes of Cooper take us but a little way towards Thoreau. Even within the Transcendental circle we still find him apart, unmotivated by his environment. A biographer of Whitman, Binns, tells us that the spirit of that notorious democrat was no less solitary at core than Thoreau's. Emerson, who set the fashion of solitude, whose "strength and doom" was "to be solitary"; who wrote in his Journal in 1859, "By all means give the youth solitude"; who urged the Cambridge Divinity students "first of all to go alone"; who remarked<sup>1</sup> that "The age tends to solitude"; Emerson, constitutionally affable, admitted that pure solitude was "impracticable", decried "wolfish misanthropy", and reminded himself that "it is not the solitude of place, but the solitude of soul which is so estimable to us"<sup>2</sup>. Emerson clearly was no such relentless prober into secrecy as Thoreau. Hawthorne, who saw "on every visage a Black Veil!" and who did not conceal his personal horror of the spiritual vacua he created in fiction; and Herman Melville, who shuddered throughout his long masterpiece of the wide and lone Atlantic, "Moby Dick," "encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life;"<sup>3</sup>

1- Life and Letters in New England.

2- Journal, I, 51.

3- Everyman edition, p. 241.



these clearly have not the self-sufficiency of Thoreau, who "was bred to no profession; never married; lived alone; never went to church; never voted; refused to pay a tax to the State; ate no flesh, drank no wine, never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, used neither trap nor gun."<sup>1</sup> Only Thoreau among the transcendentalists by constitution demanded life - long letting alone - was content in solitude. Only Thoreau, therefore, can we visualize as an isolated personality, lying prone on the ice to explore the bottom of Walden Pond, or reading Homer in his hut on bad nights, or hoeing beans in quiet clearings, or strolling in condescension alone towards the village, or talking to a friend across the pond, or holding the world at bay with a paradox.

Yet Thoreau was not all self-sufficiency. Claiming to have been born for solitude, professing to find it "wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time,"<sup>2</sup> deliberately living alone in the woods two years, remaining absolutely hostile to compromise his life long, he still had not one third of the complacency of Emerson. What students of Thoreau have always suspected, his Journal, betraying the self-doubter in almost equal proportions with the self-exploiter, now confirms. The following chapters would establish what was the idea or emotion which underlay all that Thoreau felt and thought and wrote.

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1- Emerson's Biographical Sketch.

2- Walden (Crowell), p. 142.





II. TEMPERAMENT.

The personality of Thoreau has never been presented in full, mainly because it has been treated in no case by anyone who was not interested in proving a point -- that Thoreau was a hermit, that Thoreau was not a hermit, that Thoreau had pity and humor,<sup>1</sup> that Thoreau was cold and inhuman, that Thoreau was human, that Thoreau was a perfect Stoic,<sup>2</sup> that Thoreau was a sentimentalist,<sup>3</sup> that Thoreau was a skulker.<sup>4</sup> Emerson, who knew him best, cannot always be relied on to give a fair account of the man, because Emerson's interest in him was the interest of a philosophic father in a philosophic son; he spoke of him as "My Henry Thoreau";<sup>5</sup> he commended Thoreau the naturalist only because he practiced (or so Emerson believed) what Emerson the philosopher of Nature preached; and after Thoreau's death he edited a volume of letters which he said he had selected deliberately to appear "a perfect piece of Stoicism." An adequate understanding of the human being in Thoreau can be had only after one has gone to the contemporary accounts and brought away only those judgments which either seem genuine in themselves or are unavoidably true because they are parenthetical and unpremeditated. "You may rely on it that you have the best of me in my books, and that I am not worth seeing personally," Thoreau wrote <sup>6</sup> to Calvin H. Greene in February, 1856. But we may remember that he hated

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1-Littell's Living Age, vol. 146, 1880, pp. 190, 191 (from the London Spectator.)

2- Emerson.

3- Lowell.

4- Stevenson.

5- I am indebted for this as well as for much other information to Mr. Chas. J. Woodbury of California, who had intimate personal relations with Emerson for several years following 1865.

6- Familiar Letters, p. 410.





visitors; and may be sure that if the best of him is in his books, by no means all of him is or can be there. If we are to expose the real nerve of his thinking, the pervading emotion of his life, we must go further than the pages he printed.

One is never in doubt that Thoreau's personality was neither negative nor secretive, but pungent. Emerson found him too cold in his later years; but Thoreau believed Emerson was patronizing him,<sup>1</sup> and certainly by constitution was no man to bask for long at a time in the sun of Emersonian geniality. To a cool observer Thoreau must have been most interesting merely for himself. M. D. Conway remarked<sup>2</sup> that Thoreau's character had "a fine aroma", At least his personality was positive enough to hold its own among the distinct and aggressive natures of Emerson and Miss Fuller and other transcendentalists.

Stevenson took the cue for his remarkable criticism of Thoreau's disposition from the "thin, penetrating, big-nosed face." The face, even the whole figure is significant. The Rowse crayon<sup>3</sup> and the Worcester photograph<sup>4</sup> both show a face by no means simple to describe - contemptuous yet sensitive, aglint with irony yet dissolved in the pains of self, cold yet sensuous, alert yet lonely. His figure was "unusually slight," says Dr. E. W. Emerson,<sup>5</sup> with sloping shoulders and narrow chest. But it was "alive with Thoreau" in every motion. Emerson's statement that "There was somewhat military in his nature" scarcely does justice to the quality of this

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1- Journal, III, 256.

2- Fraser's Magazine, April, 1866.

3- 1854. Frontispiece of volume I of the Journal.

4- 1856. " " " WEEK (WALDEN EDITION)

5- Salt, 134.



"life" in Thoreau's body. There was much of determination; his hand was "habitually clenched;"<sup>1</sup> in walking he was a "noticeable man,"<sup>2</sup> with "his eyes bent on the ground, his long swinging gait, his hands perhaps clasped behind him, or held closely at his side." There was also much of wildness; Hawthorne<sup>3</sup> thought him something of an Indian, found him<sup>4</sup> "wild, original --- as ugly as sin," with uncouth though courteous manners. Rose Hawthorne Lathrop<sup>5</sup> reported him as "haunting," "strange", "wild," "sad as a pine-tree". Alcott<sup>6</sup> was "touched by his aboriginal vigor," and Mr. F. B. Sanborn, his biographer,<sup>7</sup> jotted down these notes in his diary after his first sight of Thoreau: "Thoreau looks eminently sagacious --- like a sort of wise, wild beast --- a ruddy weather-beaten face, which reminds me of some shrewd and honest animal's --- some retired philosophical woodchuck or magnanimous fox --- He walks about with a brisk, rustic air, and never seems tired."

Thoreau's racial inheritance is as interesting as it is complicated. It is simple to conjecture that he derived his narrowness from the Scotch,<sup>8</sup> his tendency to hold an extreme logical position from the French,<sup>9</sup> his wistfulness<sup>10</sup> and his wildness<sup>11</sup> from the Celts, his clear, pure mysticism from the Quakers, and his sense of moral

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1-Dublin University Magazine, Nov. 1877.

2- Salt, 87.

3- American Note-books, Sept. 1842.

4- Julian Hawthorne, Hawthorne and his Wife, I, 29.

5- Moulton's Library of Literary Criticism \* "Thoreau".

6- Sanborn, 192.

7- Sanborn, 198-9.

8- Trent, American Literature, 338.

9- Wendell, American Literature, 333.

10- Wm. Sharp, Encyclopedia Britannica.

11- John Burroughs, quoted by Havelok Ellis in The New Spirit, p. 92.





responsibility from the Puritans. It is more reasonable to measure what his immediate family and his townsmen must have meant to him. Self-assertion was probably in the family from early times.<sup>1</sup> Sanborn adduces a plausible plebeian note in his ancestry.<sup>2</sup> "Thoreau, the descendant of New Jersey islanders, seamen, and men accustomed to earn their own living, saw no reason why he should not do the same. The instinct of the plebeian was as strong in him as was the pride of the patrician in Hawthorne. Hence his untiring, peasantlike industry, his disputatious and refractory social attitude, so unlike the serene calm of Emerson, and so different from the versatile caprices of Channing." The father gave Thoreau little more than his workmanlike quality; we hear that he was "small, deaf, and unobtrusive,"<sup>3</sup> "a cautious man, a close observer, methodical and deliberate in action", who "produced excellent results."<sup>4</sup> The mother contributed her quick wit, her high spirits, audacity and alertness. "His mother, and the Dunbar family, were remarkable for their keen dramatic humour and intellectual sprightliness," says G. Beardsley in the Dial.<sup>5</sup> Sanborn<sup>6</sup> declares she was "a kindly, shrewd woman", and credits her with "an incessant and rather malicious liveliness --- sharp, sudden flashes of gossip and malice." She was "one of the most unceasing talkers ever seen in Concord".<sup>7</sup> That she was "handsome," or that she was "fond of dress, and had a weakness for ribbons, which her austere friend, Miss Mary Emerson ("Aunt Mary"?) once endeavored to rebuke in a manner of her own,"<sup>8</sup> does not make her <sup>the</sup> less Thoreau's mother.

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1- Wendell, 332.

2- Reminiscences of Seventy Years, p. 426.

3- Sanborn, 25.

4- Salt, 21.

5- April 1, 1900.

6- Sanborn, 24.

7- Sanborn, 19.

8- Sanborn, 19.



Thoreau himself could "pour forth endless streams of the most interesting talk."<sup>1</sup>

Those qualities of Thoreau's mind and heart which a just reader of him cannot afford to forget are six: sensibility, concreteness of vision, thoroughness, wild combative self-sufficiency, humor, and wistfulness.

Thoreau was more at the mercy of his senses than a "perfect piece of Stoicism" is expected to be. He detected an unpleasant odor from the houses in the village. "He had many elegances of his own," says Emerson. "Thus, he could not bear to hear the sound of his own steps, the grit of gravel; and therefore, never willingly walked in the road, but in the grass, on mountains and in woods." The sight of a suffering fugitive slave could strike extraordinary pity from him. One of the most effective chapters in Walden is on "Sounds", and his passion for music was more than philosophical --- sometimes almost "tore him to pieces." He betrays a sensitiveness in his human relationships which one is tempted to employ for explaining his very aloofness. Sanborn says "he could not speak of" John Thoreau's death "without physical suffering, so that when he related it to his friend Ricketson at New Bedford, he turned pale and was forced to go to the door for air."<sup>2</sup> Certainly he was not at center the iron-cold structure of Stevenson's essay. Indeed, it is possible that his indifference was after all only a superstructure built on a very unfirm foundation, that his whole "stoic" career was the career of one who demanded desperately the right to feel what he pleased as secretly but as powerfully as he pleased. Sanborn<sup>3</sup> tells this story of Thoreau

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1- Higginson, in Moulton, "Thoreau".

2- Sanborn, 176.

3- Sanborn, 50.





at 19 or 20; "While in college he once asked his mother what profession she would have him choose. She said, pleasantly, 'You can buckle on your knapsack, dear, and roam abroad to seek your fortune;' but the thought of leaving home and forsaking Concord made the tears roll down his cheeks. Then his sister Helen, who was standing by, says Channing, 'tenderly put her arm around him and kissed him, saying, "No, Henry, you shall not go; you shall stay at home and live with us." And this indeed he did." That kind of youth was not the Cato he is supposed by many to have been. He preferred Concord to cosmopolitanism for a reason. He cannot lecture the world on the subject of the emotions.

If Thoreau felt and saw and heard much, he also felt and saw and heard concretely. In his writing and in his living his genius for the specific, his preoccupation with details, his love of facts, and his passion for real experience mark him off as distinctly as is possible from his transcendental brethern. His handiness with tools, which the pencil-making evinces, has become almost proverbial. Whitman said to Traubel,<sup>1</sup> "He was always doing things of the plain sort - without fuss." He seemed eminently sensible to his friends; Hawthorne<sup>2</sup> found in him "a basis of good sense" and thought him "a healthy and wholesome man to know." Alcott<sup>3</sup> pathetically refers us to his "russet probity and good sense." Certainly an utter sincerity and a passion for genuine experience were in him. "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers," he writes in Walden. "To be a philosopher is not to have subtle thoughts, or even

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1-Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 212.

2-American Note-books, Sept., 1842.

3- Concord Days, 15.



to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust." As a man of letters, shrewd, certain, swift, concreteness, as we shall see, comprised his capital.

What Emerson preached in smiling benignity, his disciple Thoreau lived and described with amazing thoroughness, with set lips. Keeping both his poise and singleness of aim intact, always on tiptoe ready for a new experience, he could pursue a subject of conversation more relentlessly and longer than could any other in the company. If he is insignificant in that he took all of his ideas from Emerson, he is significant in that he reduced them to their practicable and visualizable essence.

With his passion for thoroughness and his satisfaction with it, and on the rebound from that, went the combativeness which is probably Thoreau's distinguishing personal trait. Living "extempore", living wild, living the life of whim that Emerson recommended, actually and busily engaged in breaking up the tiresome old roof of heaven into new forms, Thoreau was unpleasant to contradict, and dangerous to curb. He lived by instinct on the defensive, striking back constantly with paradox, and steadily throwing up works around his person and his philosophy with assertion. "Thoreau is, with difficulty, sweet," said Emerson superbly. Thoreau rarely bothered about being sweet. He had an appetite for sarcasm and a gift for rejoinder, and often indulged both purely for his own satisfaction in closed pages of the Journal. He was a valuable talker, and did not spare his fellow-townsmen any criticism.<sup>1</sup> Stevenson most absurdly charges him with a "hatred of a genuine brand, hot as Corsican revenge, and

1- Sanborn, 70 years, 452.





sneering like Voltaire." Emerson's gentler judgment, that "he did not feel himself except in opposition," comes much closer to the truth.

Thoreau had more of native humor than any of the transcendentalists, just as he had a livelier appreciation of facts. Cynical generally, saturnine, impish on occasions, always pointed, it sometimes broadened into boisterousness. Sanborn<sup>1</sup> says that when Ellery Channing visited Thoreau at Walden, they "made that small house ring with boisterous mirth." There are puns in the Letters and Journal which only pure fun could order. There is testimony that Thoreau liked to come down from his study of evenings to dance or whistle or sing; he sang "Tom Bowline" with considerable relish. He has scarcely the "cast-iron quaintness" which Dickens<sup>2</sup> observed in the New England transcendentalists, and which was the product of their limitations rather than the expression of their genius. Thoreau saw pretty far at times into human nature; thence came his humor.

Throughout all Thoreau's professions of self-sufficiency sound hauntings of dissatisfaction and wistfulness, which, Celtic or not, are by no means the equivalent of the indefinite yearning of the German romantiasts, but give hint of a very real passion in Thoreau's makeup. Neither a Jacques nor a Timon nor a Shropshire lad, he did and said such things in his time as to bring charges of "affectation, inconsistency, and morbidity."<sup>3</sup> There are traces of pure affection now and then which Stevenson left no room for. He was guide and teacher for children on berrying parties, and their comforter when

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1- Sanborn 182.

2- American Notes.

3- W. R. Alger, Moulton - "Thoreau."





they stumbled and spilled their berries.<sup>1</sup> His favorite songs were from Hemans and Moore.<sup>2</sup> There are youthful love poems to be accounted for, and rumors of a love affair. And there is the famous paragraph in Walden, by no means clear on the face of it, and not yet explained, which Emerson calls "the mythical record of his disappointments":

"I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travellers I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who had heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves."

So much of personal wistfulness, most of it never expressed (in this passage well veiled by allegary), suggests that there was something with which Thoreau was not completely satisfied; and that neither the transcendental universe nor the will-o'-the-wisps of Beauty and The Present, but some one of the human relationships themselves. What Thoreau thought of Friendship, and why he then chose to live alone, it is necessary to know.

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1- Conway, Fraser's.

2- Channing, 41.



### III. FRIENDSHIP

"Surely joy is the condition of life," wrote our Chanticleer of the nineteenth century. It is perfectly obvious that he would have his readers shun melancholy as they would shun the Devil. He, at least in his capacity of author and lecturer, will be no moping owl to complain that existence is desperate. He will not have it that an author's life is hard - he to whom "to be hindered from accomplishing" his literary labors in the Walden hermitage (whither he went, as everyone knows, to assemble the Week from ten years of the Journal) "for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish." Tingling with idealism, exalted by freedom, like Chanticleer on tiptoe quivering with expansion, Thoreau could veil his disappointments.

But he did not blot the sadness he could veil. "He had many reserves," says Emerson, "and knew how to throw a poetic veil over his experience." He threw no poetic veil over his Journal, which was his experience; and he left elsewhere a litter which is easy to collect and with the testimony of which it will be easy to indict him on the charge of experiencing disillusionment.

The parable of the hound, the bay horse, and the turtle-dove is plainly a "mythical record of disappointments." But what disappointments has been a question. What his quest was he never told; not that he was ignorant himself, not that it was anything like the blue flower of Novalis, a symbol of indefinite and infinite yearning; but "he had many reserves." "The Present," "the self," "the secret of Nature," "Happiness", "Absolute Beauty," "Reality" have all been offered by commentators. If Thoreau were entirely unknown to us personally, any of these conjectures might be plausible. Thus if we



were setting out to prove the case for "the Present," we should find him reminding himself that he "must live above all in the present"<sup>1</sup>; and declaring in 1850 <sup>2</sup> "In all my travels I never came to the abode of the present." But it is clear to me that Thoreau's quest was not for any metaphysical entity, because he wore his metaphysics as comfortably as anyone; and furthermore he was eminently satisfied with his Present and his Self and his Beauty and his Reality. [It is clear to me that this single disappointment of his life was not an intellectual but an emotional one, and that it arose in the domain of the human relations. I think his ideal was perfection in human intercourse, and that his quest was for an absolutely satisfactory condition of friendship.] The quest was vain because it confused values, because it sought to identify the ideal with the actual and personal in friendship. What his ideal was, and what it was which could have seemed to him absolutely satisfactory, will later on be seen.

The evidence is the Journal and passage in the Dial. In March 1842,<sup>3</sup> Thoreau wrote, "Where is my heart gone? They say man cannot part with it and live." A year later he edited for the Dial <sup>4</sup> passages from the Chinese Four Books, one paragraph of which reads thus (the italics are mine): "Benevolence is man's heart, and justice is man's path. If a man lose his fowls or his dogs, he knows how to seek them. There are those who lose their hearts and know not how to seek them. The duty of the student is no other than to seek his lost heart." Now this Chinese "heart" is not the "heart" of sentimental

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1- Journal, II, 138.

2- Journal, II, 74.

3- Journal, I, 350.

4- Dial, IV, 206.





Christendom. Yet I believe that Thoreau, putting his own construction upon the passage, employed it eleven years later in Walden to veil a personal longing which was genuine and keen and which demanded expression if only through parable. A year before Walden appeared, he was writing in his Journal<sup>1</sup>, "No fields are so barren to me as the men of whom I expect everything but get nothing. In their neighborhood I experience a painful yearning for society which cannot be satisfied, for the hate is greater than the love." Why the hate was greater than the love, Chapter IV may show. It is enough here to mark the positive pain and regret in the voice of the skulker.

What was Thoreau's hope from Friendship, and where are the unmistakable signs of his disappointment?

No one ever spoke more finely about Friendship. "No one else, to my knowledge," says Stevenson, "has spoken in so high and just a spirit of the kindly relations; and I doubt whether it be a drawback that these lessons should come from one in many ways so unfitted to be a teacher in this branch.----- The very coldness and egoism of his intercourse gave him a clearer insight into the intellectual basis of our warm, mutual tolerations." No one ever claimed more for Friendship. "All those contingencies," wrote Thoreau in his Journal in 1841,<sup>2</sup> "which the philanthropist, statesman, and housekeeper write so many books to meet are simply and quietly settled in the intercourse of friends." No one ever expected more from Friendship. In 1843 Thoreau wrote to his friend Mrs. Brown,<sup>3</sup> "We always seem to be living just on the brink of a pure and lofty intercourse which would

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1- Journal, V, 87.

2- Journal, I, 190.

3- January 24. Familiar Letters.





make the ills and trivialness of life ridiculous. After each little interval, though it be but for the night, we are prepared to meet each other as gods and goddesses."

At the same time, no one was ever more disappointed in Friendship. Thoreau speaks his disappointment in two voices. One voice is for the world, has the tone of sharp reproof and the manner of the cynic philosopher, expresses contempt for "that old musty cheese that we are." "I speak out of the rarest part of myself," Thoreau wrote to Harrison Blake in 1849. In that key he delivers such sentiments as this in another letter to Blake,<sup>1</sup> "In what concerns you much, do not think that you have companions; know that you are alone in the world." Or this in the Journal:<sup>2</sup> "How alone must our life be lived! We dwell on the seashore, and none between us and the sea. Men are my merry companions, my fellow-pilgrims, who beguile the way but leave me at the first turn of the road, for none are travelling one road so far as myself." It was in this key that his acquaintances found him strung; it was the man "who never felt himself except in opposition" that Emerson is complaining of here in his Journal:<sup>3</sup> "If I knew only Thoreau, I should think cooperation of good men impossible. Must we always talk for victory, and never once for truth, for comfort, and joy? Centrality he has and penetration, strong understanding, and the higher gifts -- but all this and all his resources of wit and invention are lost to me in every experiment, year after year, that I make, to hold intercourse with his mind. Always some weary captious paradox to fight you with, and the time and temper wasted." And we find Thoreau reporting from his side a conversation

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1- Familiar Letters, 164.

2- Journal, I, 239.

3- Emerson's Journal, IX, 15.



Emerson<sup>1</sup>: "P.M. - Talked, or tried to talk, with R. W. E. Lost my time -- nay, almost my identity. He, assuming a false opposition where there was no difference of opinion, talked to the wind - told me what I knew - and I lost my time trying to imagine myself somebody else to oppose him." It is plain that we can learn very little about Thoreau's real feeling in the matter of Friendship from his published writings or from his conversations; in what he published he scowled and strutted; in conversation he rose up like a game bird at flutter of opposition and never lowered his head. Emerson and Thoreau are peers in egoism; they tell us nothing.

Thoreau's other voice is for himself; its very persistence distinguishes Thoreau from any of his transcendental fellows. "Love is a thirst that is never slaked," he wrote in his Journal. No one knew what was needed to quench that thirst, precisely because no one could even be sure of its existence. "You are not living altogether as I could wish," wrote Thomas Cholmondeley, the English friend, to Thoreau in 1856.<sup>3</sup> "You ought to have society. A college, a conventional life is for you. You should be the member of some society not yet formed.----- Without this you will be liable to moulder away as you get older. Your love for Nature is ancillary to some affection which you have not yet discovered. The great Kant never dined alone. Once, when there was a danger of the empty dinner table, he sent his valet out, bidding him catch the first man he could find and bring him in! So necessary was the tonic, the effervescing cup of conversation, to his deeper labors.----- The lonely man is a diseased man, I greatly fear. See how carefully Mr. Emerson avoids it; and yet,

1- Journal, V, 188.

2- Journal, VIII, 231.

3- Atlantic Monthly, Dec., 1893.



who dwells, in all essentials, more religiously free than he? ---- By such a course you would not lose Nature. But supposing that reasons, of which I can know nothing, determine you to remain in "quasi" retirement; still, let not this retirement be too lonely." Thoreau did not need to be told all this, hoping as he continually was in his solitude that the quality of affection would be born, that the hound, the horse, and the turtle dove would pause and wait for him and consent to be stroked.

The history of Thoreau's personal experiences in Friendship is written in the early poems and in the Journal. They give one best to understand what were the nature and requirements of Thoreau's ideal, and what were his psychological fortunes.

"His biography is in his verses, " said Emerson. The poems serve best, perhaps, to prove both that his ideal of human intercourse was with him from the first, and that the personal, real affection for which he yearned was never the affection of or for this or that particular person, but was the sentiment of affection, or the capacity for affection, itself -- that thing which, too late to mend matters, he found had been ruled, perhaps without his consent, out of his life. There were rumors of an unreturned, even martyred love, for one Ellen Sewall, and the lines from his first contribution to the Dial, "Sympathy."

"Each moment as we nearer drew to each,  
A stern respect withheld us farther yet,  
So that we seemed beyond each other's reach,  
And less acquainted than when first we met,"

have been said to refer covertly to his relations with her. W. R.





Alger<sup>1</sup> considers that "there was uncommon love in him, but it felt itself repulsed, and, too proud to beg or moan, it put on stoicism and wore it until the mask became the face." Salt<sup>2</sup> hints darkly that "certain sonnets which he addressed to her will some day see the light." Many have sentimentalized the legend. As a matter of fact, the evidence that Thoreau ever loved any particular woman is exceedingly slight. To Mrs. Emerson in 1843 he writes "You must know that you represent to me woman, for I have not travelled far or wide."<sup>3</sup> "Ugly as sin," "sad as a pine tree," sober as an Indian even at ten, stolid at college, eyes trained from birth on infinity, uncompromising always in Friendship as in other matters, it is unlikely that he ever sensed the loss of a living heart. It was the total constitutional lack of so desirable and fundamental an organ that perplexed and saddened him. The verses "To the Maiden in the East" cannot be autobiographical so much as expressive of the fastidious ideal of love that Thoreau's youthful melancholy had fashioned out of the egoistic materials of his temperament. Its strenuous delicacy and plaintive laboriousness are wholly characteristic of Thoreau's early verse.

"It was a summer eve,  
The air did gently heave  
While yet a low-hung cloud  
Thy eastern skies did shroud;  
The lightning's silent gleam,  
Startling my drowsy dream  
Seemed like the flash  
Under thy dark eyelash.

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1- Moulton's Library of Literary Criticism, "Thoreau."

2- Page 39.

3- Familiar Letters.



"Direct thy pensive eye  
Into the western sky;  
And when the evening star  
Does glimmer from afar  
Upon the mountain line,  
Accept it for a sign

That I am near,  
And thinking of thee here.

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"I'll walk with gentle pace,  
And choose the smoothest place,  
And careful dip the oar,  
And shun the winding shore,  
And gently steer my boat  
Where water-lilies float,  
And cardinal-flowers  
Stand in their sylvan bowers."

Some lines of the same period,

"My love must be as free  
As is the eagle's wing,"

and

"Let such pure hate still underprop  
Our love, that we may be  
Each other's conscience,

with their blither, cooler notes, confirm the judgment that Thoreau  
was only idealizing from the beginning.

The Journal, containing a wealth of self-revelation of a  
character which a reader only of Thoreau's books does not dream of,



continues for us the history of Thoreau's experiences in Friendship. "My Journal should be the record of my love," writes Thoreau in the second volume.<sup>1</sup> It is as well the record, from the earliest passive stage to the shriller end, of his relations with that monster to transcendentalists, society. For Thoreau society is only a multiplicity of friends - or of persons who might be friends.

In 1845 Thoreau read Abelard and Heloise;<sup>2</sup> first struck fire in friction with society, when he was arrested for refusing to pay taxes; and lost a friend or two. Henceforth his path is by no means a smooth one; doubts much more substantial than the yearning he could veil with allegary assail him.

A series of extracts from the Journal (and occasionally elsewhere) can, better than anything else, indicate the real qualities of Thoreau's temper and the trend of his feeling for friends and for mankind.

1850:<sup>3</sup> - "I love my friends very much but I find that it is of no use to go to see them. I hate them commonly when I am near them."

1850: -<sup>4</sup> "I go and see my friend and try his atmosphere. If our atmospheres do not mingle, if we repel each other strongly, it is of no use to stay."

1851: -<sup>5</sup> "I wish my neighbors were wilder."

1851: -<sup>6</sup> "Just put a fugitive slave into the cars for Canada."

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1- Page 10.

2- Journal, I, 346.

3- Journal, II, 98.

4- Journal, II, 110.

5- Journal, II, 171.

6- Journal, III, 37.





1851: -<sup>1</sup> "What is the use of going to see people whom yet you never see, and who never see you? I begin to suspect that it is not necessary that we should see one another, ---- The society of young women is the most unprofitable I have ever tried. They are so light and flighty that you can never be sure whether they are there or not there. I prefer to talk with the more staid and settled - settled for life, in every sense."

1851: -<sup>2</sup> "Oh, I yearn toward thee, my friend, but I have not confidence in thee, I am not thou; thou art not I."

1851: -<sup>3</sup> "It would give me such joy to know that a friend had come to see me, and yet that pleasure I seldom if ever experience."

1852: -<sup>4</sup> "I seem to be more constantly merged in nature; my intellectual life is more obedient to nature than formerly, but perchance less obedient to spirit. I have less memorable seasons. I exact less of myself. ----- O, if I could be discontented with myself! "

1852: -<sup>5</sup> " \_\_\_\_\_ is too good for me.--- I am a commoner. To me there is something devilish in manners. --- I should value E's praise more, which is always so discriminating , if there were not some alloy of patronage and hence of flattery about it."

1852: -<sup>6</sup> "If I have not succeeded in my friendship, it was because I demanded more of them and did not put up with what I could get; and I got no more partly because I gave so little."

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1- Journal, III, 116.

2- Journal, III, 61.

3- Journal, III, 150.

4- Journal, III, 66.

5- Journal, III, 254.

6- Journal, III, 256.



1852: -<sup>1</sup> "I go away to cherish my idea of friendship. Is not friendship a great relation?"

1854: -<sup>2</sup> "I sometimes dream of a larger and more populous house, standing in a golden age ---- a house which you have got into when you have opened the outside door ---- a house whose inside is as open and manifest as a bird's nest."

1854: -<sup>3</sup> "I feel that, to some extent, the state has fatally interfered with my lawful business ---- interrupted me and every man on his onward and upward path. ---- I have found that hollow which even I had relied on for solid."

1856: --<sup>4</sup> "I thrive best on solitude. If I have had a companion only one day in a week, unless it were one or two I could name, I find that the value of the week to me has been seriously affected. It dissipates my days, and often it takes me another week to get over it. ---- We must go out and re-ally ourselves to Nature every day."

1856: -<sup>5</sup> "And now another friendship is ended. I do not know what has made my friend doubt me, but I know that in love there is no mistake, and that every estrangement is well founded. But my destiny is not narrowed, but if possible the broader for it."

1856: -<sup>6</sup> "Farewell, my friends. ---- For a long time you have appeared further and further off to me. I see that you will at length disappear altogether."

1857: -<sup>7</sup> "If I should make the least concession, my friend

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1- Journal, IV, 314.

2- Walden, p. 254-6.

3- Slavery in Massachusetts. Miscellanies, 406.

4- Journal, IX, 200.

5- Journal, IX, 249.

6- Journal, VIII, 231.

7- Journal, IX, 279.



would spurn me."

1857: -<sup>1</sup> "I have tried them (men) ---- they do not inspire me ---- I lost my time ---- But out there! (in Nature) Who shall criticise that companion? It is like the hone to the knife. Shall I prefer a part, an infinitely small fraction, to the whole?"

1857: -<sup>2</sup> "It would be sweet to deal with men more, I can imagine, but where dwell they? Not in the fields which I traverse --- It does look sometimes as if the world were on its last legs."

1858: -<sup>3</sup> "The doctors are all agreed that I am suffering for want of society. Was never a case like it. First, I did not know that I was suffering at all. Secondly, as an Irishman might say, I had thought it was indigestion of the society I got."

1860: -<sup>4</sup> "Why will you waste so many regards on me, and not know what to think of my silence? Infer from it what you might infer from the silence of a dense pine wood. ---- You know that I never promised to correspond with you, and so, when I do, I do more than I promised."

1862: -<sup>5</sup> "These apples have hung in the wind and frost and rain till they have absorbed the qualities of the weather or season, and thus are highly seasoned, and they pierce and sting and permeate us with their spirit."

1862: -<sup>6</sup> (Quoting from the Old Testament): - "The vine is dried up, and the fig-tree languisheth; the pomegranate-tree, the palm-tree, also; and the apple-tree, even all the trees of the field,

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1- Journal IX, 46.

2- Journal, IX, 205.

3- Familiar Letters, 345.

4- Familiar Letters, 353. To Daniel Ricketson.

5- *Wild Apples*

6- *Ibid*





are withered; because joy is withered away from the sons of men."

This, from a letter written to Mr. Sanborn by Mrs. W. H. Forbes, closes the account:<sup>1</sup> "In his last illness it did not occur to us (children) that he would care to see us, but his sister told my mother that he watched us from the window as we passed, and said: 'Why don't they come to see me? I love them as if they were my own'. After that we went often, and he always made us so welcome that we liked to go."

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1- Sanborn, 271.



IV. NATURE.

"The meaning of Nature was never attempted to be defined by him," said Emerson. It is true that Thoreau did not dogmatize about Nature. Yet, time and again, in the Journal and elsewhere, he defined his own personal relation to her so clearly that no one now can mistake it. Such epithets as "companion", "friend," and "bride" leave no uncertain impression. Nature was Thoreau's best friend.

He did not, like Wordsworth, seek the secret of the universe in Nature; did not, like Bryant, harken there for the voice of God to lead his steps aright; did not, like Carlyle, strive with infinite din to glimpse through smoke and fire "Destiny, Divine Providence, the inflexible Course of Things" and Nature herself, with her "veracities and her integrities." [Thoreau never doubted what Wordsworth had calmly made sure of, what Matthew Arnold was beginning to mistrust, what Hardy and Synge have now shown forth as cruelly wrong -- that Nature is good to him who understands her, that man's duty is by feeling his locality to know her and love her. Nature was Thoreau's only friend.]

Alcott considered that Thoreau had "the profoundest passion for it (Nature) of anyone living."<sup>1</sup> Certainly there was no one like him in America. The mere fact that he was a philosophic son of Emerson, who with the aid of Coleridge had joined Bacon with Plato, matter with mind, nature with intellect, experiment with dialectic, sensation with Ideas, to engender the Transcendental Nature, does not furnish a reason or an adequate motive for Thoreau's ruling passion. Emerson, who indulged in "a breath under the apple tree, a siesta on

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1- The Forester.



the grass, a whiff of wind, an interval of retirement" only in order to "revive the overtired brain" or in order to restore "the balance and serenity,"<sup>1</sup> understood that Thoreau's bent was independent of his own influence, declaring that "his determination on Natural History was organic." If Emerson studied Nature to know himself, Thoreau married Nature to know himself.

"Remember thy Creator in the days of thy Youth; i.e., lay up a store of natural influences, "counselled Thoreau in the Journal for 1851.<sup>2</sup> He never came out from under those influences. As finely susceptible as Wordsworth, as passionate to report his spiritual experiences, with a personality more pointed and a sense of humor more often indulged than Wordsworth's, he wore a rapt and stealthy air about his approach to Nature which no one else has shared. In the woods his face is said to have shone with a light not seen in the village.<sup>3</sup> For him there was "a nature behind the common, unexplored by science or by literature, "which like the plumage of the red Election-bird, he hoped would" assume (for him) stranger and more dazzling colors, like the tints of morning, in proportion as I advanced further into the darkness and solitude of the forest." "I (have not) seen such strong and wild tints on any poet's string."<sup>4</sup>

He had a passionate desire to exhibit his strange love as she dressed for him, to reproduce these absolutely strange elements of Nature in literature. Lowell's youthful judgments,<sup>5</sup> of Thoreau that "generally he holds a very smooth mirror up to nature," and of his

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1- Woodbury, Century, 1890.

2- Journal, II, 330.

3- Fraser's Conway.

4- Week, p. 51.

5- Pertaining to Thoreau, p. 23.





literary achievement that "Melville's pictures of life in Typee have no attraction beside it," by no means did justice to Thoreau's effort. Nor does Henry James' patronizing notice of "his remarkable genius for flinging a kind of spiritual interest over these things (birds and beasts and trees)"<sup>1</sup> strike the center. John Burroughs<sup>2</sup> questions Thoreau's sincerity: "If Thoreau had made friends with a dog to share his bed and board in his retreat by Walden Pond, one would have had more faith in his sincerity. The dog would have been the seal and authentication of his retreat. A man who has no heart for a dog, - how can he have a heart for Nature herself?" But Burroughs has never been quite able to understand what Thoreau was doing, and has been content to observe that "he put the whole of Nature between himself and his fellows;" forgetting that for Thoreau there were no "fellows" and only one love.

Thoreau told Mrs. Brown in 1841<sup>3</sup> that Nature was "more human than any single man or woman can be." In those early days such a remark amounted in Thoreau to little more than a pleasantry, or at the most an exercise in paradox. Then Nature was mere mild "Alma Natura",<sup>4</sup> and meant mainly health to Thoreau. But very soon he is "struck with the pleasing friendships and unanimities of Nature, as when the lichen on the trees takes the form of their leaves."<sup>5</sup> Nine years later he finds himself a party to such a "unanimity:"- "My acquaintances sometimes imply that I am cold; but each thing is warm enough of its kind. ---- You who complain that I am cold find Nature cold. To me she is warm."<sup>6</sup> ----- "If I am too cold for human friend-

1- Hawthorne, 94.

2- Indoor Studies, 237.

3- Familiar Letters, 37.

4- Journal, I, 59.

5- Natural History of Mass., Dial  
1842.

6- Journal, III, 147.



ship, I trust I shall not soon be too cold for natural influences. It appears to be a law that you cannot have a deep sympathy with both man and nature. Those qualities which bring you near to the one estrange you from the other."<sup>1</sup> At Walden he finds<sup>2</sup> that "every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me, "and in 1854 we hear him at his distance asserting, "I cannot spare my moonlight and my mountains for the best of men I am likely to get in exchange."

"Because joy is withered away from the sons of men," and because friends of the perfect sort are not to be found among the sons of men, he hastens to play the "welcome guest"<sup>3</sup> to Nature. "Who shall criticise that companion?" Did not their atmosphere mingle? Was not she wild enough to be a neighbor? Was not she staid and settled for life? Was not she minding her own business pretty well - superbly, indeed? Was he not she; was she not he? Did not she give all that he demanded? Was it not altogether possible to cherish his "idea" of friendship in the company of Nature? Did not Nature hold out to him the only hope of assurance that life was yet joyful when he saw slavery in Massachusetts?<sup>4</sup> With his friends disappearing over the rim of his little - or big - world, was not Nature left? If men dwelt nowhere, were there not fields still to traverse? Who could "communicate immortality" to him better than Nature?

"All Nature is my bride", announced Thoreau in 1857.<sup>5</sup> The bride and groom, it seems, had been children together. "Henry talks about Nature just as if she'd been born and brought up in Concord,"

1- Journal, III, 400.

2- p. 138.

3- Journal, XI, 281.

4- Close of Slavery in Massachusetts.

5- Journal, IX, 337.





observed Madam Hoar,<sup>1</sup> Nature was as faithful a consort to Thoreau as Ocean was to Melville's Moby Dick<sup>2</sup>: "Almost universally, a lone whale proves an ancient one. Like venerable moss-bearded Daniel Boone, he will have no one near him but Nature herself; and her he takes to wife in the wilderness of waters, and the best of wives she is, though she keeps so many moody secrets." Thoreau's marriage with Nature was something like a Platonic marriage of minds, but more like an Oriental companionship. He behaved toward her most tenderly, resolving to live "more and more continently" for her sake, and in Chesuncook affecting to despise such men as are not tender, but make a "coarse and imperfect use of Nature."<sup>3</sup> The two died together, perhaps: "When he had wakeful nights", writes Sophia Thoreau<sup>4</sup>, "he would ask me to arrange the furniture so as to make fantastic shadows on the wall, and he wished his bed was in the form of a shell that he might curl up in it."

When we say that Thoreau found in Nature his ideal friend, we mean that he found in her his complete sympathizer. Hawthorne, reports W. D. Howells, who as a young man "interviewed" Thoreau, "said that Thoreau prided himself on coming nearer the heart of a pine-tree than any other human being."<sup>5</sup> Thoreau has much to say concerning this affinity. "Friendship is the unspeakable joy and blessing that results to two or more individuals who from constitution sympathize. ----- Who are the estranged? Two friends explaining."<sup>6</sup> "Friendship takes place between those who have an affinity for one another and

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1- Outlook, June 3, '05 - Mable.

2- Moby Dick, p. 342.

3- Maine Woods, p. 131.

4- Sanborn, 311

5- Harper's Magazine, August, 1894.

6- Journal, III, 146.





is a perfectly natural and regular event."X "It is hard to know rocks. They are crude and inaccessible to our nature. We have not enough of the stony element in us." Nature, thought Thoreau, could always be trusted by one who had this affinity for her; perhaps it was because the affinity between himself and Nature had not yet become complete that on a certain day, as Joseph Hosmer recounts,<sup>1</sup> after long deliberation and many trials at a mutual understanding, he spanked a woodchuck who would keep pestering his premises.

It is easy to see where Thoreau wished all the sympathy to be. "In the whole school," says Lowell, speaking of the European sentimentalists after Rousseau,<sup>2</sup> "there is a sickly taint ----- a sensibility to the picturesque in Nature, not with Nature as a strengthener and consoler, a wholesome tonic for a mind ill at ease with itself, but with Nature as a kind of feminine echo to the mood, flattering it with sympathy rather than correcting it with rebuke or lifting it away from its unmanly depression, as in the wholesomer fellow-feeling of Wordsworth." I believe that in Thoreau there is also a taint, though not a "sickly" taint by any means. Emerson's identification of Intellect with Nature, and his pronouncement that "In fine the ancient precept, 'Know thyself', and the modern precept, 'study Nature', become at last one maxim", is itself tainted with the maddest American intellectual egoism. And Thoreau, who always went one step farther than Emerson, went here also one step farther. When Mr. Paul Elmer More went into forest-retirement for two years he found his imagination "awed and purified" by contact with nature, and found that great peace of mind was the fruit of the fellowship -

1- Salt, 73.

2- Rousseau and the Sentimentalists.



peace in the presence of Nature's great, calm, "passionless power."<sup>1</sup> Now Mr. More considered then<sup>2</sup> that Nature to Thoreau had also been a "discipline of the will as much as a stimulant to the imagination." I hope to show in the next chapter that this was scarcely the case. Wherein Thoreau's will had discipline I cannot see. Certainly his intellect ran wild in Nature; and there was little else in him (as in the other transcendental essayists) to discipline. "He had no temptations to fight against - no appetites, no passions."<sup>3</sup> He lived indeed quite outside the circle of Good and Bad. When Thoreau told himself in the Journal for 1841,<sup>4</sup> "I exult in stark inanity, leering on Nature and the Soul, "he surely was launching forth on no career of strict self-supervision. As early as 1842<sup>5</sup> he was recommending the forest to the readers of the Dial for no other reason than that "The solitary Rambler may find a response and expression for every mood" in its depth. He refused to like men because they begrudged him indefinite expansion in their direction. "I am not expanded when I meet a company of men," he complained in 1857.<sup>6</sup> And of course Nature expected nothing of him. "What a hero one can be without moving a finger!" he exclaimed at 21. He might have exclaimed in 1850, "What a lover of Nature one can be without conceding a mood!"

"We gaze on Nature with Narcissus eyes,

Enamoured of our shadow every where."

His ideal was independence; Nature never criticised him. His ideal demanded something absolutely to be trusted, capable of any interpre-

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1- A Hermit's Notes on Thoreau. Shelburne Essays, Vol. I.

2- Ibid.

3- Emerson - Sketch.

4- I, 175.

5- Natural History of Massachusetts.

6- Journal, IX, 209.





tation, inexhaustible to any curious mind, giving all and taking nothing yet not complaining of the sacrifice; Nature was all that. If it be found that in the end the gift of Nature to Thoreau shrank down to nothing more substantial than a sensation - the tang in the crab-apple's flavor - no one need be surprised. Nature does not encourage concentration, and if one's constitution calls for concentration he need not ask for more than one wild apple in his hand.

[Thoreau can be very sensibly condemned for seeking himself in Nature. But his successors in the poet-naturalist rôle can be condemned yet more for seeking their/selves in nature. One cannot say that Thoreau was a better man than they, or a stronger; Nature is neither good nor bad, neither strong nor weak. One can say that Thoreau is vastly more interesting than they. At least he is the only one of them all whose personality is intrinsically so interesting that we shall always be interested in preserving the books in which on Nature's mirror it is reflected.]

Thoreau himself despised what he called "the mealy-mouthed enthusiasm of the (mere) lover of nature."<sup>1</sup> One smiles to think what he would say in these latter days, when Thomas Bailey Aldrich tells us<sup>2</sup> that "Whether or not the fretful porcupine rolls itself into a ball is a subject over which my friend John Burroughs and several brother naturalists have lately become as heated as if the question involved points of theology." He would deplore the exploitation by nature-fakirs and Nature-hacks of the "pathetic fallacy" in their annual stories. He would be monstrously impatient with the poor "nature-study" of bird-books and tree-books which prefers quite harm-

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1- Works, IX, 16.

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less and quite useless curiosity to dangerous and quite useful speculation. He would say that modern nature books insult the intelligence, and mistake us for a race of school-children. He would not agree that "one must live until tired, and think until baffled, before he can know his need of Nature," or that all one goes to the woods for is to find a place where he can "know without thinking."<sup>1</sup> He would have veneration for the manly John Burroughs, but he would agree that he is no poet; "Thoreau thinks, Burroughs knows."<sup>2</sup> He would be unspeakably sickened by the hot hysteria in the books of Richard Jefferies, with their "insatiable yearning for a full, rich life," their mindless groping for a newer "series of ideas" and a newer "range of thought" than those which have exercised the world for five thousand years - or five million; their morbid fidgeting to be "plunged deep in existence," their sad conviction that "there is something more than existence," their unfledged talk of "soul-culture," their total want of originality, their total spiritual sterility. If one seeks a point of difference between Thoreau and Jefferies, he need read no further than this sentence in the latter's "Story of my Henry": - "I should like to be loved by every beautiful woman on earth from the swart Nubian to the white and divine Greek."<sup>3</sup> Yet Thoreau would have to recognize that Jefferies, as well as the others of the tribe, is his legitimate offspring; he would perhaps be brought to suspect that his philosophy by its very nature must degenerate; he would see that Jefferies' childlike discussions of the human relations, of idleness, of artificiality, of Time and Space, of the necessity of "facilitating the operation of the will" (as if anything

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1- From Dallas Lore Sharp.

2- Edinburgh Review, Oct., 1908

3- P. 121. All the quotations from Jefferies are either from this book or from Salt's biography.



could make willing easy!)), however degenerate, are yet his degenerates.

Further comparisons are of no value, bear us in no nearer to Thoreau. Whitman, reflecting once on the difference between the relations to Nature of Burroughs and Thoreau, finally said to Traubel,<sup>1</sup> "After all, I suppose outdoors had nothing to do with that difference. The contrast just shows what sort of men Thoreau and Burroughs were to start with." It is what "Thoreau was to start with," what Thoreau remained, and what Thoreau came to be, that is the subject of our investigation.

We have seen that Thoreau's ideal of the friendly relation demanded complete sympathy and absolute toleration from the second party. We have seen that he found no such friend among mankind, went therefore to Nature, and was satisfied in her companionship.

When Nature was about to slay his body with her consumption, he was not resentful. She still was friend to what he believed to be the real part of him, his mind. That is to say, she still permitted him to think whatever he pleased. To uncover the particular belief and the particular sentiment which underlay all this faith in his own mind, an examination of the philosophical position and the philosophical history of Thoreau is the one thing needful.

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1- Walt Whitman at Camden, 231.



V. SPHERICITY.

An absurd passage in the Journal for 1856 <sup>1</sup> will do well enough to inform us of the precise nature of the demands which Thoreau made upon the universe and which no friend save Nature could meet:-

"Aug. 31. Sunday, P.M. - To Hubbard Bath Swamp by boat.

"There sits one by the shore who wishes to go with me, but I cannot think of it. I must be fancy-free. There is no such mote in the sky as a man who is not perfectly transparent to you - who has any opacity. I would rather attend to him earnestly for half an hour on shore or elsewhere, and then dismiss him. He thinks I could merely take him into my boat and then not mind him. He does not realize that I should by the same act take him into my mind, where there is no room for him, and my bark would surely founder in such a voyage as I was contemplating. I know very well that I should never reach the expansion of the river I have in my mind, with him aboard with his broad terrene qualities. He would sink my bark (not to another sea) and never know it. I could better carry a heaped load of meadow mud and sit on the thole-pins. There would be more room for me, and I should reach that expansion of the river nevertheless. ----- These things are settled by fate. The good ship sails - when she is ready. ----- What is getting into a man's carriage when it is full, compared with putting your foot in his mouth and popping right into his mind without considering whether it is occupied or not? --- Often, I would rather undertake to shoulder a barrel of pork and carry it a mile than take into my company a man. It would not be so heavy a

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1- Journal, IX, 46.





weight upon my mind. I could put it down and only feel my back ache for it."

Expansion, for Thoreau, is the one thing needful. Friends are a weary weight, companions are a burden. He too maintained<sup>1</sup> that "Perfect benevolence does not admit the feeling of affection ---- Perfect benevolence is the very highest thing ---- It is difficult to forget all the men in the world." Thoreau found it easy enough to forget all the men in the world. Early in his Journal<sup>2</sup> he had ventured to say, "Love is so delicate and fastidious that I see not how it can ever begin." Love never could begin for him, locked as he was within the walls of his ego, jealous as he was of his private circle of vision. "Platonic love" does not describe his condition; Channing<sup>3</sup> says he "never knew him to say a good word for Plato"; Platonic love asks for the union of minds; Thoreau could not possibly take any mind into his own; his mind was "so delicate and fastidious." From the center of his circle he implored anyone to "understand" him, to "know everything without being told anything";<sup>4</sup> not to question but to sympathize; not to ask for proof but to send in total love cheerfully and in respectful silence. "I shall die"; said he, " and then to think of those I love among men, who will know that I love them though I tell them not!" It is easier now to see why his "idea of a friend" was "some broad and generous natural person, as frank as the daylight, in whose presence our behavior will be as simple and unconstrained as the wanderer amid the recesses of these hills."<sup>5</sup> To be friends two persons must be something inhuman like the elements --

1- Sacred Books of the East, Muller, XXXIX, 347.

2- P. 309.

3- P. 58

4- Familiar Letters, p. 201.

5- Journal, I, 442.



the daylight -- to one another, must have universes that coincide. The circles must not intersect. If there is to be a company of men, let them be like the stage company on Cape Cod, "men who had at length learned how to live ----- contented to make just such a company as the ingredients allowed."<sup>1</sup> Thoreau could love the maiden in the East only as his free fancy placed her in his sky; he had said in Walden,<sup>2</sup> "There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon;" and in the poem he employed a whole hemisphere of sky for a place to meet his Maiden in. He asked men to "love and praise my aspiration rather than my practice," not adding that there are aspirations and aspirations. He morbidly demanded as "the essence of friendship" "a total magnanimity and trust." "What Henry Thoreau needed was to be believed in through thick and thin and then let alone." He asked for the privilege not of loving but of admiring, and he exercised man's prerogative not in being hurt but in being disgusted. Howells<sup>3</sup> says it was a "John Brown type, a John Brown ideal, a John Brown principle," for which he was protagonist, and not a man John Brown. The sympathy he called for was of a higher <sup>mood</sup> ~~strain~~ than that in which "all men sympathize."<sup>4</sup> It was a sympathy of which the mind could make any disposition it chose; it could be exercised on fish as legitimately as on men; and it was to be paid for only by toleration, agreement, veneration.

Professors Trent and Erskine<sup>5</sup> have it that "The attempt at Brook Farm to perfect man in the community suggested to Thoreau the

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1- Cape Cod, 22.

2- Walden, 90.

3- Harper's, Aug. 1894.

4- Journal, XII, 370.

5- Great American Writers, p. 128.



opposite experiment of perfecting man in solitude." Thoreau, it is more correct to say, was born possessed with the demon of expansion. "Every man should stand for a force which is perfectly irresistible," he wrote to Blake in 1848.<sup>1</sup> "How can any man be weak who dares to be at all? --- What a wedge, what a beetle, what a catapult, is an earnest man. What can resist him?" If the dominant note in the nineteenth century romantic thought was the note of expansion, Thoreau in that century, on tiptoe like Chanticleer, stands himself for pure expansion of the pure self. If the expansion of Chateaubriand was an expansion of the religious sensibility; if that of Wordsworth was benevolent, if that of Carlyle was ethical, if that of Ruskin was aesthetic, if that of Emerson was intellectual, that of Thoreau was most purely egoistic. "The cost of a thing," says he, "is the amount of what I call life ( and what we should call self-satisfaction) which is required to be exchanged for it." There was within Thoreau a rage for self-satisfaction, not always, as we have seen and shall see more, to be appeased. Stevenson says "he had not enough of the superficial, even at command." It is clear to me that he fled the superficial for "centrality," and wanted centrality as a caged lion wants liberty. "As long as possible live free and uncommitted," he advised in Walden.<sup>2</sup> All he asked was to be let alone. As early as his twentieth year he was saying in a college oration,<sup>3</sup> "The characteristic of our epoch is perfect freedom, - freedom of thought and action;" twelve years later he was saying,<sup>4</sup> "The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right." He told his sister at twenty that "For a man to act himself

1- Familiar Letters, p. 166.

2- P. 86.

3- Familiar Letters, p. 8.

4- Civil Disobedience.





he must be perfectly free; otherwise he is in danger of losing all sense of responsibility or of self-respect." Thoreau craved, first of all, independence of men; he never borrowed anything for that reason.<sup>1</sup> His subservience to this idea of independence was almost as complete as this passage from the essay Walking is cruel:- "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, - if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk, ----- absolutely free from all worldly engagements." He asked for elbow room; he never knew in advance in what direction he might have to expand: "I have no more distinctness or pointedness in my yearnings than an expanding bud. ----- I feel ripe for something, yet do nothing, can't discover what that thing is. I feel fertile merely."

Stevenson says "Thoreau is dry, priggish, and selfish" and has "none of that large, unconscious geniality of the world's heroes." That is probably a just judgment. George William Curtis says "A call from Thoreau in the highest sense meant business." Dr. E. W. Emerson says "He was on his guard not to be over-influenced." It is impossible to imagine a more relentless or a more disagreeable expansion.

Expansion of the pure self explains Thoreau's attitude towards collective society. Alcott<sup>2</sup> considered him "the best republican citizen in the world, - always at home, and minding his own affairs." Certainly the troubles of mankind caused him no disturbance. He was as steadfastly self-centered as Newman was concerned for the personal soul when he, in his Apologia, "holds it better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the

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1- Sanborn, 280.

2- Journal, X.



many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say ~~she~~ should be lost, but should commit one venial sin." Thoreau believed indeed that God was with him; "God does not sympathize with the popular movements," he said. He had a Nietzschean contempt for the "gregariousness" of men;<sup>1</sup> assemblies of men he usually saw only as assemblies of animals with broad flapping ears. Reacting violently against the "natural sympathy" and the "benevolent villains" of the eighteenth century, he permitted himself to describe society as "pigs in a litter, which lie close together to keep each other warm";<sup>2</sup> and opposed Fourierism because it asked men to stand propped against one another rather than planted, each one firmly, in the Eternal. A curt passage in the Maine Woods<sup>3</sup> reflects best, perhaps, if vicariously, Thoreau's own contempt for the intercourse of men:- "We had been told in Bangor of a man who lived alone, a sort of hermit, at the dam, to take care of it, who spent his time tossing a bullet from one hand to the other for want of employment. ----- This sort of tit-for-tat intercourse between his two hands, bandying to and fro a leaden object, seems to have been his symbol for society."

The course of Thoreau's career in expansion is interesting. From the first he stood apart. Says a college mate, "The touch of his hand was moist and indifferent, as if he had taken up something when he saw your hand coming - and caught your grasp upon it."<sup>4</sup> From the first he had determined to grow perfect after his own fashion. "What a hero one can be without moving a finger!" But not until his remarkably essay, "The Service, or Qualities of the Recruit," written

1- Journal, X.

2- Journal, IV, 397.

3- Maine Woods, p. 255.

4- Pertaining to Thoreau, 131.



about 1840 perhaps in answer to the "discourses on Peace and Non-Resistance which in 1840 were so numerous in New England",<sup>1</sup> sent to the Dial, rejected by Miss Fuller, and left unprinted in full till Sanborn's edition in 1902, do we find in words Thoreau's policy of spherical expansion:-<sup>2</sup> "We shall not attain to be spherical by lying on one side or the other side for eternity, but only by resigning ourselves implicitly to the law of gravity in us shall we find our axis co-incident with the celestial axis, and by revolving incessantly through all circles, acquire a perfect sphericity. ----- The brave man is a perfect sphere, which cannot fall on its flat side, and is equally strong every way." The recruit in the ranks of the Eternal can dispense with bravado before the world: "The coward wants resolution, which the brave man can do without. ---- His (the brave man's) bravery deals not so much in resolute action, as healthy and assured rest; its palmy state is a staying at home and compelling alliance in all directions." Here is the last word needed to prove that Thoreau from the first was self-appointed to expand spherically at the expense of the world's gifts - friendship, love, fame. Perhaps more of the essential Thoreau can be seen in The Service than in any other twenty-five pages of him.

Thoreau, then, we launch upon his voyage of expansion. "It is time now that I begin to live," he tells himself in the Journal for 1841.<sup>3</sup> When he goes to Ktaadn he is reassured to find that the forest-owl is "plainly not nervous about his solitary life." At Cape Cod the sight of a hundred drowned bodies" was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected ----- it is the individual and private

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1- Sanborn, The Service, VII.

2- P. 6.

3- Journal, I, 299.





relation of man to the universe" that demands our sympathy". In 1850 he accidentally sets fire to some neighboring woods, and so destroys the property of a half dozen ~~of~~ farmers; but he is more concerned for himself than for the farmers, since the woods <sup>were</sup> ~~are~~ the very boundary of his sphere. In 1851 his harvest of satisfaction does not appear so rich as he had expected: "Here I am thirty-four years old, and yet my life is almost wholly unexpanded. How much is in a germ!"<sup>1</sup> He notices in alarm that "the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming more distinct and scientific; that, in exchange for views as wide as heaven's cope, I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope." But he decides that he has perhaps contracted "a fatal coarseness" as the "result of mixing in the trivial affairs of men," and decides that human wishes are intrinsically and inevitably vain: "The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or perchance a palace or temple on the earth, and at length the middle-aged man concludes to build a wood-shed with them." He takes Nature now to wife, and henceforth alternates between doubt that his expansion is bearing the fruit for which his appetite was set and over-emphatic self-assurance. In 1853 he looks back wistfully to riper days when he grew like corn in the night:- "Ah, those youthful days! Are they never to return? When the walker does not too curiously observe particulars, but sees, hears, scents, tastes, and feels only himself, ----- his expanding body, his intellect and heart. ----- The unbounded universe was his. A bird is now become a mote in his eye." But he secures himself again in Walden, whither he had gone most confidently to "front only the essential facts of life" "I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances con-

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1- Journal, II, 317.



fidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with success unexpected in common hours."<sup>1</sup> The next year he is looking to the sky for assurance; "Would you see your mind, look at the sky."<sup>2</sup> By 1856 he is willing to concede that the fruit of expansion may be slight and intangible after all: "Let not your life be wholly without an object, though it be only to ascertain the flavor of a cranberry, for it will not be only the quality of an insignificant berry that you will have tasted, but the flavor of your life to that extent, and it will be such a sauce as no wealth can buy."<sup>3</sup> By 1857 life to Thoreau is empty beside the life he sketched in The Service:- "In proportion as death is more earnest than life, it is better than life."<sup>4</sup> In 1858 "Truth compels me to regard the ideal and the actual as two things."<sup>5</sup> As early as 1849 Thoreau had observed<sup>6</sup> that perhaps the tang in the wild apples flavor was the one thing solid, and could "make my apparently poor life rich." In the last few years, and particularly after the John Brown episode, this tang is all that remains in Thoreau's universe, one is tempted to conclude. The necessity of wildness is all he can declaim on in Walking. In the ninth volume of the Journal he hints that "life is barely tolerable" at times.<sup>7</sup>

Coming from the pure mysticism of The Service, through the practical self-assurance of Walden, down through the tortuous mysticism of the later Journal, to drain the cup of expansion, Thoreau finds the dregs to be a single sensation, a shrivelled tang. The

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1- Walden, 340.

2- Journal, III, 239.

3- Journal, IX, 37.

4- Ibid, X, 177.

5- Letters, 332.

6- Letters, 174.

7- P. 222.



lion in his cage purred contentedly in 1840; breathed easily and deeply in pastoral sphericity in the nature-essays of 1842 and 1843; swelled opulently and confidently in the Week; began to prowls about the walls and sniff in apprehension at the locks in Walden; chased off all intruders next; lay down, sore and annoyed, during the slavery debates; rose up and struck out with his paw once when prodded; lay down again in the end to sniff Eternity for tang.

"Timon is shrunk indeed."

We have said that Thoreau was born with the germ of expansion within him. Whence came the external, the philosophical, sanction? Who else preached sphericity before him? Who gave him words and ideas wherewith to announce his program and to report his progress?

The expansion-seed certainly took wing in the beginning from Transcendental Germany. It is not necessary here to discuss the philosophies of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling; their exaltation of the ego was epoch-making in speculation.

But "Transcendentalism is one thing, and Romanticism is another." It has never been determined just how much the movement which grew out of German Transcendentalism and which is called German Romanticism had to do with American Transcendental expansion. Mr. Paul Elmer More believes that "the transcendental philosophy of New England had absorbed the language and ideas of German romanticism, if not its inmost spirit;"<sup>2</sup> and suggests that the formulae of the school may

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1- Beers, English Romanticism, II, 166.

2- Thoreau and German Romanticism.





have been transmitted to America through the magazines.<sup>1</sup> There are not a few of the Romantic marks on the Americans. Emerson, in the English Traits,<sup>2</sup> said "The Germans think for Europe;" Emerson had been given more than an outline of the German program by Coleridge. Even before the time of the Romanticists, Zimmerman, a German Rousse-  
lian, had sent forth some of their ideas in his work of popular phil-  
osophy, "Thoughts on the Influence of Solitude on the Heart," which J. G. Robertson counts "among the most suggestive prose works of the eighteenth century."<sup>3</sup> This book ran through ten editions in America between 1793 and 1825;<sup>4</sup> Daniel Ricketson, Thoreau's friend, had a copy in his shanty when Thoreau visited it in 1857.<sup>5</sup> Thoreau himself bears some resemblance to the German Romanticists. Brandes says, "To the Romanticists paradox was the ~~fine~~<sup>fine</sup> flower of thought."<sup>6</sup> Novalis saying "Whoever knows what it is to philosophize knows what it is to live."<sup>7</sup> sounds like an American intellectual egoist speaking. The Germans too decried "extreme busyness", contemned the professions, and despised politics. Novalis was made much of in the Dial; and Thoreau worships Night now and then like a Novalis. Professor Beers<sup>8</sup> and Professor Nichol<sup>9</sup> both believe that the parable of the hound, the bay horse, and the turtle dove is a direct reminiscence of Novalis and so of Germany.

But we have already seen that the suggestion for that parable

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1- See Goodnight's German Literature in American Magazine.- Uni. of Wisconsin.

2- P. 254.

3- History of German Literature, p. 291.

4- Goodnight, p. 130.

5- Journal, IX, 324.

6- Main Currents. Romanticism in Germany, p. 39.

7- The Disciples at Sais, p. 69.

8- English Romanticism, II, 165.

9- American Literature.



might have come from an Oriental Bible in an English translation. And I am of the opinion that most of the so-called resemblances between the Americans and the Germans are no more than the inevitable resemblances between kindred minds trained on the same (European) theme. Professor Elton<sup>1</sup> very deftly points out that while it can be said that the German influence on English and American speculation was profound, it can be said with equal foundation that any speculation is more or less profound per se, and does not always ask for full instructions from without. A certain passage from Emerson's Journal may reinforce that point:<sup>2</sup> - "Mr. Scherb ( A German exile in Concord) attempted last night to unfold Hegel for me, and I caught somewhat that seemed cheerful and large, and that might, and probably did, come by Hindoo suggestion. But all abstract philosophy is easily anticipated - it is so structural, or necessitated by the mould of the human mind." Anyone who has begun a "structural" philosophy like Spinoza's appreciates that only a hint - the first definition - is needed to set the mind careering at once through the whole system unaided.

It may be worth while to experiment with a typical American Transcendental interest, and measure how much of German influence it shows. I believe that the Americans, and particularly Thoreau, got their Oriental enthusiasm not from the Germans but directly from their own philosophical needs and indirectly from England.

Thorean himself, say Channing and Sanborn<sup>3</sup>, had not a free use of German and had no enthusiasm for it. The books sent by Cholmondeley were "English, French, Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit", The Oriental

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1- English Literature, 1780-1830.

2- VIII, 69. 1849.

3- Personality of Thorean, p. 36.



books which Thoreau bequeathed to Emerson<sup>1</sup> were in English and French. In the prefaces to his selections from the Oriental Scriptures in the Dial Thoreau cites only English editions - by Colebrooke, Jones, Hodgson, Collie, Wilson, or Wilkins. He need not have gone outside his Chalmers's Poets, which he read without skipping, to come under the enthusiastic Sir <sup>William</sup> Jones' influence; Jones' Oriental poems and "Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations" were printed there.

By what chance, of course, Thoreau came to read the Orientals, or what editions he read, is of little consequence. Why they were congenial, and who interested him in them, is more significant. I believe that the encouragement to this reading might have come solely from Emerson and thence from England - always, of course, against the broad background of European transcendental assertion of the moral and intellectual dignity of man. Mr. W. C. Brownell<sup>2</sup> supposes that Emerson, "who, bland angel as he was, very much wanted his own way," "invented or elected his philosophy." And it is perfectly reasonable to agree that, born with a capacious mind, moved by the sentiment of intellectuality, enchanted by glimpses into Coleridge's bottomless intellect, quick to accept Coleridge's policy of reflection for reflection's sake, and committed to comprehensiveness of intellect as the definition and goal of genius, Emerson might have gone quite independently to whatever works seemed to him profound and taken away what caprice or plan dictated. Mr. Sanborn<sup>3</sup> says that Emerson owned one of the first copies of the Bhagavad-Gita in America, that he lent it freely, and that he got it read much more widely than the Harvard Library copy was read. It was to English or French scholars, and not

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1- Emerson's Journal, IX, 419.  
2- American Prose Masters, 152.  
3- Nation, May 12, 1910 - p. 1481.





to German scholars, that the American Transcendentalists went - Jones, Colebrooke, Mackintosh, Wilson, Wilkins, Lee, Wilford, Marshman, and Collie - descendants of a long line of purely English Orientalists hailing from the fourteenth century. German and English scholars of the early nineteenth century vied with each other for recognition as inspirers of European Oriental enthusiasm.<sup>1</sup> The matter can hardly be settled. It is enough to show that Emerson's ( and Thoreau's) Orientalism could have been an independent growth.

Mr. More<sup>2</sup> makes the point that Thoreau received the breath of the German philosophy, but "always, it need not be added, with differences caused by other surroundings and traditions." I believe that these "differences" are much more interesting than the resemblance itself. The two schools are exactly alike in that they preach infinite expansion of self. But when we consider that the Americans lived what they thought, as Novalis did not; that the aspiration of the Americans was as much for a whole people as it was for their aesthetic selves; that the Germans often, the Americans never, inclined to the fleshly; we see very important details of dissimilarity. There is a greater difference than any of those. The Germans' expansion was emotional; the Americans' was intellectual. And Thoreau took his cue not from Germany at all but from America; from the New England intellectual <sup>re</sup>naissance and from Emerson, who himself was much more a Platonist than he was a German.<sup>3</sup>

"No truer American ever lived," said Emerson. Probably no one not a Yankee could have written so shrewd and yet so earnest a book as Walden. Thoreau at least was writing what he believed to be the

1- See A. W. Schlegel's works, V. 15, for controversy between himself and Prof. H. H. Wilson, English Orientalist.

2- The Centenary of Longfellow.

3- J. H. Harrison, The Teachers of Emerson.



truth for America, and not solely what pleased his own fancy; he did not want to live alone merely to be eccentric, but that he might be normal - to the brim a normal American. And to be a normal American in 1840 was neither to have forgotten one's Puritan heritage nor to have failed to cast one's self in with the intellectually emancipated.

De Tocqueville said that the Americans were a nation without neighbors, and given to moral self-contemplation. By 1840 New England had by no means forgotten the profound religious experiences of such men as Cotton, Wheelwright, Vane, Penn, John Woolman, Jonathan Edwards, Michael Gilman, or Samuel Hopkins; nor had it forgotten Puritanism, "the sternest school of self-reliance, from babyhood to the grave, that human society is likely to witness,"<sup>1</sup> and the firmness of whose establishment in even Thoreau's transcendental mind is attested by the fact that he denounced what he did not believe in - as, for example, money - as not only foolish but sinful. It was that ancestral Puritan voice that made Thoreau <sup>e</sup>harken to Confucius when he recommended "blamelessness of life," "simple truth and earnestness," "sincerity," and "superiority."

Neither was he unaware that a veritable renaissance of intellect had set in in New England during his boyhood. New England itself had subscribed to sphericity. Conscious of new spiritual liberty and nearly isolated from Europe during the thirty years of comparative international quiet following the Napoleonic wars, coming in that period to take account of its intellectual stock and finding it slim, craving a spiritual exaltation commensurable with the new territorial and numerical expansion of America, and piqued by such insults from Europe as Sydney Smith's article in the Edinburgh Review in 1820 -

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1- Perry, The American Mind.





"Who reads an American Book?"-it was inevitable that some of the doughtier spirits should propose to wage a grim spiritual campaign. Such spirits, deploring the busyness of their fellow-citizens, must have tired of "bargain and corruption" politics, must have sickened to hear daily such a party slogan as "two dollars a day and roast beef!"<sup>1</sup> must have stopped their ears to keep from hearing so much financial din in 1840, when bank riots in Cincinnati, currency troubles everywhere, and panic in Philadelphia forced their way upon the attention; must have scorned to notice the "nine-and-twenty benevolent and charitable institutions" that had grown up in Boston between 1810 and 1840;<sup>2</sup> must have despised Fourierism and Albert Brisbane, and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, must have held fastidious noses up above the penny newspapers which tried to be all things to all men and were, it was charged, not very much of one thing to any.

Specifically, Thoreau's doctrine of sphericity came from Emerson. "From Emerson he gained more than from any man, living or dead," says William Sharp in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Emerson, optimistically announcing that "All things show that on every side we are very near to the best";<sup>3</sup> Emerson, preaching an original philosophy of "circles" with unrivalled zeal; Emerson, declaring that "around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in Nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens"; Emerson, adducing "The Unattainable, the flying Perfect" for our wonder; Emerson, suggesting that "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outward to new and

1- Mac Master, VII, 1.

2- Ibid, VII, 66.

3- Nominalist and Realist.





larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul;" and Emerson, having it that "The only sin is limitation," caught and held and made Thoreau - or, as J. V. O'Connor in 1878 in the Catholic World would have it, "ruined" him. Mr. Woodbury says Emerson literally "stung" the "torpid" Thoreau into thought and expression. "No one meeting Emerson was ever the same again." Perhaps a conversation with Emerson furnished Thoreau a hint for The Service, for Emerson wrote this in his essay "Character":- "The face which character wears to me is self-sufficingness ---- character is centrality, the impossibility of being displaced or overset." It is possible that Thoreau saw a challenge in Emerson's essay, "The Transcendentalist" in the Dial for 1842, which contained a clause, "There is no pure Transcendentalist." Emerson has much to say upon the relations between his ideas and Thoreau's: "Thoreau gives me, in flesh and blood and pertinacious Saxon ethics, my own ethics. He is far more real, and daily practically obeying them, than I."<sup>1</sup> "I am very familiar with all his thoughts, they are my own quite originally drest."<sup>2</sup> Certainly Thoreau's ideas of Nature, Love, Friendship, Sphericity, are Emerson's - Emerson's pointed and trimmed with Thoreauvian tools. And certainly with Emerson's wide reading in Herbert, Henry More, Milton, Coleridge, Thomas Taylor, Plato, Plotinus and the Oriental Scriptures, at hand, Thoreau did not need to look to Germany for intellectual day. He had one of the best examples of the intellectual gormandizer the world has seen with him always.

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1- Journal, VIII, 303.

2- Journal VI, 74.



When Mr. More defines the larger differences between Thoreau and the Germans, I think he tends to forget that Thoreau was upon the whole altogether as rapacious for expansion as were the Germans. Thus, finding on both the marks of romanticism, "aloofness," "irony," "sacred idleness," "musical revery," "communion with Nature," and "contempt for limitations," he goes on to say for Thoreau that because he expanded from the base of character and intellect rather than from the base of sensibility and the flesh, he therefore exercised his will for discipline of self, exercised a "higher self-restraint." Mr. More suggests that several intermediary influences are responsible for this element of restraint in the American, - "The inheritance of the Puritan religion," "the British notion of practical individualism", "the lesson of Wordsworth's austerity in the devotion of Nature," the "spirit of fine expectancy" in the seventeenth century poets, the "incalculable force of Emerson's personality;" and one might add the discipline of the classics, the discipline of manual labor, and the example of the Indian race. For myself, just as later on I question Thoreau's "Stoicism," so here I question whether the difference between the Germans and Thoreau was the difference between men who exercised no restraint at all and a man who exercised a "higher self-restraint." It is no evidence in Thoreau's favor that he, with all the Transcendentalists, dealt all the time in "character" and "Intellect". "Character", said Alcott in the Dial,<sup>1</sup> "is the only legitimate institution." Thoreau himself, to be sure, "thought that without religion or devotion of some kind nothing great was ever accomplished."<sup>2</sup> There really is a great difference between the transparent-browed Novalis and the thin-nosed logical Thoreau, grey-eyed, short, erect,

1- I, 71.

2- Emerson.



clear, frosty, bracing, crowing in crisp morning tones to wake his neighbors up. And it is true that Thoreau was distinguished by a "dry light," and announced in The Service a very innocent program:- "It behoves us to make life a steady progression, and not be defeated by its opportunities. ----- Shall man wear out sooner than the sun? and not rather dawn as freshly, and with such native dignity stalk down the hills of the East into the hustling vale of life, with as lofty and serene a countenance roll onward through midday to a yet fairer and more promising setting?" But we have already seen what came of Thoreau's expansion: that Thoreau in the end was what Emerson calls<sup>1</sup> "infinitely minimized" rather than "infinitely maximized". I hope that further glances into the Journal and other localities will reveal what use Thoreau and Emerson made of the terms "intellect" and "character", and what actually came of Thoreau's "dry light."

I can find no evidence that Emerson and Thoreau believed in curbing or did curb their intellects; I can find no end of evidence that they engaged instead in a very noble kind of intellectual and moral debauch and indulged what Mr. Brownell styles their "intellectual pride and moral confidence" to the mortal limit. They believed heart and soul in "Doing as One Likes", in being as good as one can in any way one likes, and in thinking as industriously as one can in any direction he fancies.

"Spes sibi quisque,"

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1- Journal, X, 238.





from Virgil, was Thoreau's motto for The Service. Thoreau went out to Walden Pond in order to "have a little world all to myself." Thoreau was at ease at Walden. He was proud to live "extempore", "not cumbered and mortified by his memory," and was constrained at the same time to be industrious. He who lived ex tempore "set a high value on his time."<sup>1</sup> Emerson and Thoreau had ideals; their ideals were themselves. They were intellectual and moral, but intellectual and moral all to themselves. They were intellectual and moral egoists of the first order. They cared to be conscious of no limits; "Who," asks Thoreau in Walking, "but the Evil One has cried Whoa! to mankind?" The "spirit of fine expectancy" of the seventeenth century poets would not have owned New England in 1850. Herbert's face was turned upward; Emerson's and Thoreau's faces inward. Herbert pleaded with God for vision; Emerson and Thoreau only pricked themselves perpetually on to further spiritual adventures. Herbert's "morning" was that time of man's life when God permits him to glimpse the universal order and hear clearly the deep voice of Duty. Emerson's and Thoreau's "morning" was a perpetual period in which men should be "awake" - that is, have "life, and knowledge" of themselves.

As Nietzsche led a most unwise revolt against "natural" sympathy only to find himself caught in the adjacent snare of sentimental egotism, so Emerson and Thoreau led a most headlong revolt against "natural" sympathy only to plunge floundering into hopeless seas of intellectual and moral egotism. Mind-intoxicated men, cutting their own channels, thinking as they pleased, keeping their foreheads smooth<sup>2</sup>, hungry for ideas and uncritical of ideas when they come along

1- Emerson, Sketch.

2- Pertaining to Thoreau, 134.



dreading to repeat themselves, needing "infinite room" to utter their thoughts in, musing to satiety, affecting to find the reflection of their minds in the sky, refusing to argue but eager to declaim, boasting native potential omniscience, never comparing but always uttering, setting thought above knowledge, denying the statements of others by instinct, saying that God "schemed" for them,<sup>1</sup> preferring thoughts to friends, hospitable<sup>2</sup> to thoughts and not to men,<sup>2</sup> they furnish beautiful examples of the behavior of naturalism in intellect. Thinking to defy Hume's conclusions concerning "the weakness of human reason, and the narrow limits to which it is confined," they denied any limits whatever. As Ruskin said "Men are as their tastes", and Carlyle said "Men are as they are strong", so these said "Men are as they think." Fondly imagining their intellectual system to be organized on the grandest possible plan they careered on with no organization whatever; identifying "centrality" of Emersonian thought with universal gravitation, they believed themselves safe and sped on after new sensations. With no conception of that kind of intellectual organization which Newman outlines in his Idea of a University, they tore on their way to flaunt endlessly those very faculties which Newman shuddered to contemplate - "fierce, wilful human nature," "the wild living intellect of man," "the immense energy of the aggressive, capricious, untrustworthy intellect,"

There are many pictures of Thoreau the intellectual egoist, undisturbed by his "pestering imp of vanity." Emerson's friends never knew what he was writing or studying; and Thoreau liked to deliver his meaning as from an oracle. Emerson describes his usage thus:-<sup>3</sup>

1-Thoreau's Journal, I, 344.

2- Journal, II, 248.

3- Journal, 9, 354.





"It is curious that Thoreau goes to a house to say with little preface what he has just read or observed, delivers it in lump or quite inattentive to any comment or thought which any of the company offer on the matter, and when he has finished his report departs with precipitation." He was hypercritical, it seems, and always took the last word.<sup>1</sup>

As moral egoists, as well as intellectual, Emerson and Thoreau are interesting if unenviable phenomena. With unbounded confidence in the moral nature of man, and believing themselves capable of infinite goodness, they put no check on their moral speculations. Intolerably pure, intolerably conscientious, intolerably lofty, they were as good as they liked in the way that they chose.

Neither Emerson nor Thoreau was free from the intellectual demon; neither Emerson nor Thoreau escaped those intellectual perils which are inevitably contingent upon so fatally easy a system as theirs and which are visible today among the Christian Scientists. Neither Emerson nor Thoreau wound up his intellectual career with half the satisfaction that he began it. That was not possible when their method was dissipation.

We see Thoreau as early as his college days<sup>2</sup> recommending the keeping of a Journal in order to conserve one's thoughts and to be able to oversee one's mind; and he tells us that thoughts come "spontaneously", "suggest themselves." An intellectual epicure at twenty, he is an intellectual hero at thirty, when he says, "All I can say is that I live and breathe and have my thoughts," and when he believes that "to know, is to know good."<sup>3</sup> Miss Fuller said she "had a pleasant

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1- Albee, Reminiscences, 32.

2- See his college essay reprinted in Sanborn.

3- Massachusetts Natural History.





time with her mind."<sup>1</sup> So Thoreau in his prime played with his mind. He tells in the Journal for 1851<sup>2</sup> how "I had a thought this morning before I awoke. I endeavored to retain it in my mind's grasp after I became conscious, yet I doubted, while I lay on my back, whether my mind could apprehend it when I should stand erect. It is a difficult feat to get up without spilling your morning thought." The ~~last~~ later volumes of the Journal breathe no such self-satisfaction as this. There are what for Thoreau are long, incoherent, ~~read~~ <sup>mad</sup> passages which betray that, along with his loss of confidence in sphericity and his unspoken pain at the loss of friends, he was suffering a diminution of that "hard mentality", that "grip and exactitude of mind," that "mental materialism" which Emerson praised in George Herbert. Here is no noble mind overthrown; but here are mental gifts ~~it~~ squandered futilely from want of discipline.

If Thoreau had been in truth a "perfect piece of stoicism," there would have been discipline enough. I have never been able to detect a note of genuine stoicism in all of Thoreau. "He was a greater Stoic than Zeno or Scaevola or ~~Xenophanes~~," said Emerson;<sup>3</sup> but Emerson was as unqualified to recognize a perfect piece of Stoicism as was Thoreau himself.

"Zeno, the Stoic, stood in precisely the same relation to the world that I do now," Thoreau vaunted in 1838.<sup>4</sup> But he spoke with

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1- Goddard, 59.

2- III, 121.

3- Woodbury, The Century.

4- Journal. I, 126.



the slenderest knowledge of the true Zeno, whose "virtue" is of a sterner sort than Thoreau's, which is more like the virtue of the Chinese Four Books:<sup>1</sup> "Confucius exclaimed, Is virtue far off? I only wish for virtue, and virtue comes." Thoreau liked also to think that he was something of a Cato, and read, it seems pretty carefully, in Cato, Varro and Columella. But there is a vast difference between Cato and Thoreau. Cato embraced simplicity as a duty; Thoreau embraced it as a pleasure. Cato lived in Rome; Thoreau lived "in a little world of his own". Cato had a rough, sensible Lincolnian humor; Thoreau priggishly exercised humor from his books. Thoreau claimed everything for solitude; of Cato, Livy says, (XXXIX, 40), "Nulla ars neque privatae neque publicae reigerendae ei defuit."

One cannot confuse Thoreau with the practical philosophers - with Marcus Aurelius, falling back on Providence and universal philanthropy; or with moderns like Henley, groaning out defiance, and like Arnold Bennett,<sup>2</sup> whistling social sophistries and nervously pressing us to be self-possessed and indifferent. Thoreau was not weary of life, saw nothing in it to hide, heard nothing in it that should be groaned down. He surrendered himself to no universal law, resigned himself to nothing. He was no "strong and noble spirit contending against odds."<sup>3</sup> His philosophy was no "reaction against chronic anxiety."<sup>4</sup>

[Thoreau is an out-and-out Epicurean.] It is not true that he "wanted little", He wanted everything. Stevenson says he "loved to indulge the mind rather than the body," and was "an Epicurean of the nobler sort" - "cruel in the pursuit of goodness, morbid in the pur-

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1- Dial, 4, 209.

2-The Human Machine.

3- Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Stoicism.

4- William James.



suit of health. ----- that valetudenarian healthfulness which is more delicate than sickness itself." "Economy is the second or third cousin of Avarice," goes the proverb. Thoreau's absolute sense of security in the world was not Stoical but Epicurean; he said,<sup>1</sup> "A man should feed his senses on the best the land affords." Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic because he kept an inner self to which he could retire for ease and reassurance in the midst of a distressed life.

Thoreau avoided a busy life in order to have perpetual peace, to monopolize ~~his~~ his inner self. The world could not seem hard to him, because he was padded on all sides by his ego. He wrote in The Service, "Necessity is my eastern cushion on which I recline. ----- I ask no more but to be left alone with it. ----- How I welcome my grim fellow, and walk arm in arm with him. ----- I love him, he is so flexible, and yields to me as the air to my body. I leap and dance in his midst, and play with his beard till he smiles." Finally, here is this rhapsody from the Journal.<sup>2</sup> "The luxury of wisdom! the luxury of virtue! Are there any intemperate in these things? "He was confident that virtue could take care of itself; and often quoted these lines from Ennius:-<sup>3</sup>

"Ego deum genus dici et dicam coelitum,  
Sed eos non curare, opinor, quid agat humanum genus;  
Nam, si curent, bene bonis sit, male malis quod  
non abest."

"He left all for the sake of certain virtuous self-indulgences" says Stevenson. [He never gave up any vital part of himself from re-

1- Channing, 163.

2- II, 269.

3- Woodbury, Talks with Emerson, 93.





spect for universal law. He gave up only what he believed he did not need. "It is the greatest of all advantages to enjoy no advantage at all," he wrote.<sup>1</sup> He was what Sir Thomas Browne<sup>2</sup> said Diogenes was, "more ambitious in refusing all Honours, than Alexander was in rejecting none."

[He made no renuncements outright; what renuncements he seems to have made he made only after he had gained his whole will and got his own way.] He who wept at twenty to stay in Concord, affected thereafter to scorn locality. He who evaded the crisis in which most youths choose professions, was thereafter a loud despiser of professions "on principle". He rejected "the shocking and passionate" not because he had outgrown them but because he was without passions.

The Stoic ideal is indifference to things we cannot command. Thoreau said, "I do not think much of the actual;" ~~and~~ "Whatever actually happens to a man is wonderfully trivial and insignificant."<sup>3</sup> But he was far from indifferent to a number of things - his home, his freedom, his sphericity, his books, his boat, his Journal. If his Journal one day had burned, would he not have jerked the long beard of Necessity in something like anger?

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1- Journal, IX, 160.

2- Works, I, 77.

3- Journal, II, 143.



VI. SPECIFICITY.

Thoreau is more than a spherical bore. As all the greater transcendentalists had for saving remnants native qualities more vital and permanent than their rhapsodic German ingredients - Carlyle his "real power of seeing things"<sup>1</sup> and Emerson his flashing intellect -- so Thoreau has one natural gift which joins him to the ordinary world and saves him to posterity. That is his genius for the specific, his concreteness of character and vision. This genius shows itself both in his personality and in his authorship.

Thoreau is significant to culture in great measure because his personality is definite, unmistakable, and self-contained - "as free and erect a mind as any I have ever met," wrote Emerson in his Journal after first meeting Thoreau.<sup>2</sup> There is a staunch and crackling integrity about the man when he is at his best which holds him safe above "the aesthetic stupor of self-contemplation and self-absorption" which Professor Brandes<sup>3</sup> says "was the final development of Romanticism;" when one reads this passage in a letter to Harrison Blake of 1854 he need not fear for Thoreau's self-possession: "I left the village and paddled up the river. ----- I was smoothed with an infinite stillness. I got the world, as it were by the nape of the neck, and held it under in the tide of its own events, till it was drowned, and then I let it go down-stream like a dead dog." If Thoreau is a Buddhist he is a very sprightly one, agile and unrelenting.

"The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things," wrote Thoreau in Walden.<sup>4</sup> There is a thrust

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1- Chesterton, Victorian Age, 50.

2- I, 395.

3- Romanticism in Germany, 79.

4- P. 101.



an assiduous, workmanlike quality in Thoreau's mental operations which marks him as distinct from his fellows. He would take up an interest of Emerson's and extend it as far as it would go. Thus Emerson's share in the editing of extracts from Oriental Scriptures in the Dial was confined to the first set (from "Veeshun Sarma" in 1842). He stopped content with that; Thoreau took the cue at once and went on to edit five more sets before he was content. Thoreau spoke always as a person, never as a mere metaphysician. Coleridge's essay "On Sensibility" in the Aids to Reflection amounts almost to an epitome of Thoreau's thinking, but no more than an epitome.

Thoreau's reaction to his friends and to society is as sharp as any that is recorded. <sup>z</sup> No other naturalist has been as malicious, *as this imp on the Hoosack mountain, contemptuously reading scraps of civilized newspapers by the light of the campfire.* no other transcendentalist has been as fastidious. <sup>^</sup> He draws his circle very distinctly, to make sure that we see it. He is very positive; a college essay<sup>1</sup> begins, "The order of things should be reversed." He can be very disturbing as well, as Stevenson describes in a clear paragraph:-"His system of personal economics is based on one or two ideas which, I believe, come naturally to all thoughtful youths, and are only pounded out of them by city uncles. Indeed, something essentially youthful distinguishes all Thoreau's knock-down blows at current opinion. Like the posers of a child, they have the orthodox in a kind of speechless agony. These know the thing is nonsense. They are sure there must be an answer, yet somehow cannot find it. He attacks it in a new dialect where there are no catchwords ready made for the defender." Even after the catchword is brought forth and the paradox is exposed, he defeats us still by <sup>a</sup> ~~cool~~ <sup>^</sup>

1- Sanborn, 288.

2- Week, 183





cool twinkling in the eye which cannot be startled away. This passage from Life Without Principle best exemplifies what Stevenson was describing:- "A strange age of the world this, when empires, kingdoms, and republics come a-begging to a private man's door, and utter their complaints at his elbow! I cannot take up a newspaper but I find that some wretched government or other, hard pushed and on its last legs, is interceding with me, the reader, to vote for it - more importunate than an Italian beggar." When his expansion is hindered, he strikes back very decisively. He knew his expansion was good; said so with a flash of the eye; struck fire when challenged.

"For pure, nonsensical abstractions he had no taste," said Channing.<sup>1</sup> He is interesting today only in those respects in which he broke out of the thick mystic cloud which enveloped New England - broke out to breathe pure air with George Herbert or Homer or Persius or Confucius or the crabapple tree. He could be concise even in his mysticism - if that is not a paradox. He has many unfledged, thick passages in the Journal, but they are not Thoreau, and we do not have to keep them. It is only when he is definite, when for example he is telling what is silent rather than preaching about Silence, that he is valuable.

He applied what others preached, illustrated what others asserted, sought to make sphericity (to paraphrase Isaac Walton) lovely in the eyes of all men. "My thought is a part of the meaning of the world, and hence I use a part of the world as a symbol to express my thought," he wrote in the Journal.<sup>2</sup> He swore, "Antaeus-like," to "be not long absent from the ground."<sup>3</sup> It was by putting sphericity into figures, into terms of human economics, in Walden, that he became a

1- P. 213.

2- IV, 410.

3- Journal, III, 107.



classic.

Thoreau is a specific Emerson. The Service is Circles measured and cooled and visualized - even brought home in "the elephant's rolling gait" and the "huge sphere drawn along the streets." The lilt, airiness, spontaneity of Emerson are sacrificed in Thoreau for a more deliberate method; but that deliberation is worth something in itself. Emerson himself expounds its virtues:<sup>1</sup> "In reading Henry Thoreau's journal I am very sensible of the vigor of his constitution. That oaken strength which I noted whenever he walked or worked or surveyed wood-lots, the same unhesitating hand with which a field-laborer accosts a piece of work which I should shun as a waste of strength Henry shows in his literary strength. He has muscle, and ventures on and performs feats which I am forced to decline. In reading him I find the same thoughts, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step beyond and illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generalization. 'Tis as if I went into a gymnasium and saw youths leap and climb and swing with a force unapproachable, though their feats are only continuations of my initial grapplings and jumps."

Thoreau is not satisfied with sleepy generalizations, but is passionate after reality. He never lets himself forget that it is genuine experience he is seeking. "It is not easy to write in a journal what interests us at any time, because to write it is not what interests us," he wrote.<sup>2</sup> Emerson had said, "There is no pure Transcendentalist;" Thoreau wished to see what pure transcendentalism was, and went to Walden. Emerson stands and guesses, Thoreau goes and finds. Thoreau literally put his whole life into his books. Emerson wishes

1- E. W. Emerson, Emerson in Concord, 113.

2- Week, 336.



to talk mainly about tendencies, and about expansive strivings, as in Circles; Thoreau wishes to "drive life into a corner" and report what he sees. Thoreau "was acting on a truth of universal application," says Stevenson. He at least was creating a real "circle of individual rights." That he deceived himself is not relevant here.

Thoreau was born an observer, and was not ashamed of his gift. At twenty he praises Goethe in the Journal because "He is generally satisfied with giving an exact description of objects as they appear to him." Thoreau's "steps were winged with the most eager expectation;" he craved the sight and feel of facts. He could appreciate the facts of human nature perhaps better than any of the transcendental essayists. A keen and single-minded critic, he could see pretty far into the more ordinary human motives. His observations of people are not profound, perhaps because they are few; his metaphysical speed ran too fast, in the main, for him to dare to glance aside at faces in the world. But he did observe bodies and gaits and eccentricities shrewdly now and then, as in Cape Cod where he is like Dickens, or on Baker Farm in John Field's cottage. He was extraordinarily sensitive, like Stevenson himself, to the subtler of the superficial relations, as some passages can demonstrate:

"There is a proper and only right way to enter a city, as well as to make advances to a strange person; neither will allow of the least forwardness nor bustle. A sensitive person can hardly elbow his way boldly, laughing and talking, into a strange town, without experiencing some twinges of conscience, as when he has treated a stranger with too much familiarity."<sup>1</sup>

"It is a very true and expressive phrase, "He looked daggers at

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<sup>1</sup>- Journal, I, 47.





me. ----- It is wonderful how we get about the streets without being wounded by these delicate and glancing weapons, a man can so nimbly whip out his rapier, or without being noticed carry it unsheathed, Yet after all, it is rare that one gets seriously looked at."<sup>1</sup>

"With him (the lock-keeper at Middlesex) we had a just and equal encounter of the eyes, as between two honest men. The movements of the eyes express the perpetual and unconscious courtesy of the parties. It is said, that a rogue does not look you in the face, neither does an honest man look at you as if he had his reputation to establish. I have seen some who did not know when to turn aside their eyes in meeting yours. A truly confident and magnanimous spirit is wiser than to contend for the mastery in such encounters. Serpents alone conquer by the steadiness of their gaze. My friend looks me in the face and sees me, that is all."<sup>2</sup>

We should like to hear more of Thoreau's "Uncle Charles" Dunbar. A half dozen paragraphs scattered through the Journal uncover in Thoreau a gift for hitting off character which it seems too bad was never improved.

April 3, 1856:- "Uncle Charles used to say that he hadn't a single tooth in his head. The fact was they were all double, and I have heard that he lost about all of them by the time he was twenty-one. Ever since I knew him he could swallow his nose."

September, 1850:- "Charles grew up to be a remarkably eccentric man. He was of large frame, athletic, and celebrated for his feats of strength. His lungs were proportionally strong. There was a man who heard him named once, and asked if it was the same Charles Dunbar whom he remembered when he was a little boy walking on the

1- Week, 58.

2- Week, 74.



coast of Maine. A man came down to the shore and hailed a vessel that was sailing by. He should never forget that man's name."

March 11, 1859:- "E. Hosmer says that a man told him that he had seen my uncle Charles take a twelve-foot ladder, set it up straight, and then run up and down the other side, kicking it from behind him as he went down."

January 14, 1853:- "Saw near L\_\_\_\_\_'s, the 12th, a shrike. He told me about seeing Uncle Charles once, come to Barrett's mill with logs, leap over the yoke that drew them and back again. It amused the boys."

January 1, 1853:- "After talking with Uncle Charles the other night about the worthies of this country, Webster and the rest, as usual, considering who were geniuses and who were not, I showed him up to bed, and when I had got into bed myself, I heard his chamber door opened, after eleven o'clock, and he called out, in an earnest, stentorian voice, loud enough to wake the whole house, 'Henry! was John Quincy Adams a genius?' 'No, I think not,' was my reply. 'Well, I didn't think he was,' answered he."

Thoreau's genius for the specific is, <sup>to be observed</sup> on the largest scale in his assembling of isolated passages from the Journal into such organic units as Walden, the Week, and Cape Cod. It is scarcely too generous to credit him here with some measure of creative genius - of which Mr. More says he has "not a spark."

"He was probably reminded by his delicate critical perception that the true business of literature is with narrative," says Stevenson, whose hobby we can forgive for the once. "Dry precept and disembodied disquisition, as they can only be read with an effort of abstraction, can never convey a perfectly complete or a perfectly natural impression. Truth, even in literature, must be clothed with



flesh and blood, or it cannot tell its whole story to the reader." Thoreau does have unquestionably the story-teller's knack. He thought Aesop would be intolerable if his morals only were printed.<sup>1</sup> He understood that expectation is the secret of the charm in romance, and has not a few stealthy, intense fragments of narrative in his Journal. He understood too that the writer must seem to speak out of somewhere, must seem to live perpetually in such an atmosphere or even in such a locality as only his art knows how to select and arrest from the perplexing disorder of passing life.<sup>2</sup> He knew how to dress himself in a cloak of wistful expectancy; and he knew how to wrap the localities he was describing in "atmospheres," knew how to make the spirit of the ponds and the clearings permeate Walden, the spirit of the lazy river the Week, the spirit of the ominous sea Cape Cod, and the spirit of the tall forest The Maine Woods. He believed in the Milieu.

But his talent for organization is more than this; it contains elements of the dramatic. The paragraphs on "Uncle Charles" show an aptitude for "humours," and chapters in Cape Cod have been likened to Dickens.<sup>3</sup> Thoreau confesses to that temperamental dualism which creators of "humours" are likely to experience, and which forced Dandet almost against his will, as he stood by his mother's coffin, to set to grouping the surroundings (including himself) into a tableau suitable to fiction. "I am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another," Thoreau wrote in his Journal.<sup>4</sup>

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1- Journal, III, 240.

2- Journal, III, 276.

3- Introduction to the Crowell Ed.

4- IV, 291.





Thoreau could group his impressions and experiences, and frame his picture with facts,<sup>1</sup> like a playwright - or an encadreur. The vicinity of Walden Pond, the beach at Cape Cod, the seven-day stretch of the Merrimack and Concord rivers, are geographical or at least psychological units. The reader is never without a feeling of satisfaction, as of being certain of his location and his directions. The bean-field, the village, the ponds, the woods are as important in Walden perhaps as the ideas there upon economy ~~or~~ upon Homer. The railroad and the train crew are most skilfully employed as points of reference - as ~~facts~~<sup>foils</sup> for ideas - as guarantees of reality. And when Thoreau says he lay for a long time at the edge of a hole in the ice and mooned at the uneven floor of the pond, we see him in his proper place upon a stage; and ~~half~~<sup>never</sup> wish ourselves out of the audience and looking over his shoulder. This illusion of place is most admirably achieved in Walden of all Thoreau's works; Thoreau is everywhere effective in proportion as he deals in this illusion. It would be unjust to him to say that it is accidental in the Walden. He was as conscious of a dramatic mission there as he was of a spiritual mission in The Service.

1- III, 99.



VII. READING.

"We confess," wrote the youthful Lowell in his first essay on Thoreau,<sup>1</sup> "that there is a certain charm for us even about a fool who has read myriads of books. There is an undefinable atmosphere around him as of distant lands around a great traveller, and of distant years around very old men."

Lowell (who is far from insinuating that Thoreau is a fool) here puts us on the track of what is soundest and most engaging in Thoreau - his love and use of books. His genius for the specific did not fail him here but made of him (not to speak of the writer in him which it distinguished) a reader whose every remark rings true and inviting.

Thoreau is a literary epicure of a superior order. He has neither the dissolute fastidiousness of a Sylvestre Bonnard nor the all-devouring hunger of an Emerson. He does not go mad over a quoted delicacy or a rare title, and he does not read *ubiquitously* for the sensation of inspiration. But he has that "undefinable atmosphere around him" which lies around any man who has all the time in the world to do just what he pleases - in Thoreau's case the man who has all the time in the world to read and reread his favorite books. And since it is in his reading that Thoreau has most control of himself, his example is not bad. It is the chapter on "Reading" in Walden, with its reminder that the language of the classics is dead only to the degenerate, and its assertion that "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" which marks him as a scholar and distinguishes him from some of his less self-contained contemporaries.

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1- Pertaining to Thoreau, 28.



"In college he studied only what was best, and made it the rule," says Channing.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps his distinction as a writer and as a personality is to be ascribed to the fact that he studied only "what was best" in college, that he settled down to the luxurious, wonderful task of reading the older English poets through and did not always bother to gulp down the last piece of mystic bait from Germany or England. The charm and even value of his work to future generations may lie in its shrewd bookishness,<sup>2</sup> as does lie perhaps the charm of Persius in his bookishness. Thomas Wentworth Higginson thinks "his books might well be read for their quotations, like the sermons of Jeremy Taylor."<sup>3</sup>

"I am getting more of a distinct feeling as to what I want to read," wrote Mathew Arnold to his mother in July, 1849. "However, this, through a great step, is not enough without strong command over oneself to make oneself follow one's rule." Thoreau knew pretty definitely from the beginning what he wanted to read, and he was able, though in no such fashion as Arnold's and against no such horde of literary temptations as would have beset a cultured European, to keep himself within the wholesome limits which his instinct and conscience set. He has not the "Transcendental pride" in catholicity of reading, but chooses his fields like a self-reliant scholar.

There is a rare workmanlike air about Thoreau's handling of books. When he reports his reading it is from isolation, and is as if a cabinet-maker stepped out of his little shop to exhibit a pet piece of his own making. When we hear that he read Chalmers' Poets

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1- P. 263.

2- Ninety-seven different authors are quoted or mentioned or judged in the first volume of the Journal.

3- Short Studies of American Authors, 29.





through, we see him at once, sitting alone in rare quiet, fondling his book much as a carpenter squints along a smoothed board, or a sailor trims his yarn on a pile of canvas. He read as systematically as his means allowed in such fields as the Anglo-Saxon poets, the older modern English poets, the seventeenth century, the classics, and the Oriental Scriptures, always in this workmanlike fashion. Intensely serious, bent sedulously intent on self-improvement, he selected with precision and read for strength.

He had a quick and true eye for excellence. "He would pass by many delicate rhythms," says Emerson, "but he would detect every live stanza or line in a volume, and knew very well where to find an equal poetic charm in prose." "His power of literary appreciation was something wonderful," thought Higginson. One should like to have seen his collection of "extracts from the noblest poetry."<sup>1</sup>

An understanding of this bent for refining the best from books -- crystal sentences, precious lines, and fine flavors -- will take us farthest along the way of his reading, and do most to explain why he tarried here, why he never left there, why he passed this field by, why he set up an idol in that place.

An understanding of his philosophical position, which was almost identical with Emerson's, will not be half so useful a tool as this very keen one of his literary tact. Thus a very satisfactory foundation for the whole of his thinking might be built out of such passages in the four volumes of the Dial as this (from an essay, "The Art of Life. - The Scholar's Calling"):- "Life is an art. When we consider what life may be to all, and what it is to most, we shall see how little this art is yet understood ----- The work of life, so

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1- Familiar Letters.



far as the individual is concerned, and that to which the scholar is particularly called, is self-culture, - the perfect unfolding of our individual nature. ----- The business of self-culture admits of no compromise. Either it must be made a distinct aim, or wholly abandoned. 'I respect the man,' says Goethe, 'who knows distinctly what he wishes.' ----- In all things the times are marked by a want of steady aim and patient industry. ---- The young man launches into life with no definite course in view. ---the sure satisfaction ---of progress in the true direction towards the stature of a perfect man. Let him who would built ----- consider well the cost. --- Much --- he will have to renounce. ---- No emoluments must seduce him from the vigor of his devotion. No engagements beyond the merest necessities of life must interfere with his pursuit. A meagre economy must be his income. ---- The rusty coat must be his badge. Obscurity must be his distinction. ---- The business of society is not - the highest culture, but the greatest comfort. --- on all hands man's existence is converted into a preparation for existence, we do not properly live in these days. ----- We cannot get to ourselves --- Consciousness stops half way. O! for some moral Alaric, who should sweep away all that has been in this kind. --- The highest life is the life of mind. But, this life and any point of outward existence, there is never but one step, and that step is an act of the will. ---- a habit of living for effect, (is) utterly incompatible with wholesome effort and an earnest mind. No heroic character, no depth of feeling or clearness of insight can ever come of such a life. All that is best in human attainments springs from retirement.----- In retirement we first become acquainted with ourselves, our means, and ends. Whatever selfishness may seem to be in such a discipline as this, exists only in appearance.----- In self-culture lies the ground and condition of all



culture ----- The silent influence of example --- is the true reformer.----- Society is more benefited by one sincere life, by seeing how one man has helped himself than by all the projects that human policy has devised for their salvation. ----- All truth must be lived before it can be adequately proven and taught. ---- The scholar has his function ----- he must be a Cynic in independence, an anchorite in his habits, a perfectionist in discipline. Secluded from without and nourished from within.----- It is to such affects and to such men that we must look for the long expected <sup>literature</sup> ~~lit~~ of this nation. --- We have no practical poets, - no epic lives." Philosophically considered, Thoreau has little more than all that ~~to~~ say. But he is more than a philosopher; and why the artist in him could step, half Phoenix and half Chanticleer, clear voiced and clean limbed out of the swaddling clothes of the Orphic Dial, only his genius can explain.

Thoreau was most drawn to and was most durably nourished by three literary springs - the Oriental Scriptures, the classics, and the older English poets. Outside of these (if we except Emerson, whom he "rarely looked at"<sup>1</sup>, and Carlyle, whose style he admired<sup>2</sup> but could not ~~possibly~~ <sup>possibly</sup> imitate) it is seldom necessary to go for literary influences. He disliked German metaphysics and the involved German language. Indeed it is impossible for one who appreciates the quiet, clear, spare, hard Gall and Scot in him to link him for any reason with the German metaphysicians; just as it is impossible not to link with them Coleridge when he was steeped in opium and thick mystic eloquence, or Carlyle when he played the role of coffee-drinking, sulphurous mystic hounded by his own energy. "He had no favorite among the French or Germans, and I do not recall a modern writer ex-

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1- Journal, III, 134.

2- See his essay, Thomas Carlyle and his Works.





cept Carlyle and Ruskin whom he valued much," says Channing.<sup>1</sup> We must stick to the solitary "heroic writers of antiquity",<sup>2</sup> and to "those books which circulate round the world, whose sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from time to time onto linen paper," for "sources" of Thoreau.

"We read the Orientals, but remain Occidental. The fewest men receive anything from their studies", said Emerson.<sup>3</sup> Thoreau remained as Occidental as any man could be; he took from his Oriental reading merely what he was pleased to clip away; and it was always he, Thoreau, who took it. So that while he "had the best library of Oriental books in the country,"<sup>4</sup> and was <sup>as</sup>delighted over Cholmondeley's gift of Oriental books, he told Daniel Ricketson, as he might have been at "the birth of a child," the total influence of the Orientals upon Thoreau was neither broad nor profound. He cannot even be said to have understood the true significance of the Oriental position, with its stern dualism,<sup>5</sup> its difficult discipline (which in the Week he called "moral drudgery"), its pessimism and its resignation. He, like Emerson and the other Transcendentalists, was content to declare jauntily that "the Buddhist is a Transcendentalist,"<sup>6</sup> or to ape the Zoroastrian hill-top worship on some Concord eminence, or to wonder at the silent, tall arc<sup>an</sup>um of the Ramayana's forest; and let his sources go at that.

Thoreau took sentences, not ideas, from his Oriental reading. It was the sentences that stayed in his mind, and which he

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1- P. 58.

2- Walden, 104.

3- Journal, IX, 116.

4- Fraser's (Conway), April, 1866.

5- Paul Elmer More, Shelburne Essays. vol. VI.

6- "The Transcendentalist".



says<sup>1</sup> he annoyed the neighbors with repeating. "One wise sentence is worth the state of Massachusetts many times over," was his judgment. Young Storms Higginson, writing for the Harvard Magazine in 1862<sup>2</sup> on Thoreau, has it almost exactly: "He had a passion for Oriental literature, especially the 'Bhagmat Geeta.' ---- From these heathen writings his keen discernment enabled him to gather much practical good, gleaming from them maxims which today may help to shape the perfect mind and character." Thoreau, insofar as he was a moralist at all and insofar particularly as he was a transcendental moralist, attended to the Confucian precept which he edited for the Dial among the selections from the Four Books: "Tze Kung asked, who is a superior man? Confucius replied, He who first practices his words, and then speaks accordingly. "If Emerson intellectualized the Oriental Scriptures, Thoreau used whatever sayings in them could crisply advise him what to do or neatly and with an air of finality justify what he did. With their aid he could "press the signet of eternity upon many a fleeting moment." There is something youthful, and therefore delightful, about the liberties this crisp, deft man takes with the heavy-tongued Orientals. It is not the liberty which Hugo takes in his Orientales, lurching along

"Voluptuously swaying

Upon an elephant."<sup>3</sup>

It is the liberty which a curious and earnest youth (the hopeful Thoreau, or the weary Lafcadio Hearn, or all America herself in 1840), ambitious to know old and great things, disliking the "shocking and passionate,"<sup>4</sup> perhaps deceived by vague mystery and high talk but

1- Week, 66.

2- Pertaining to Thoreau.

3- "La Captive."

4- Thoreau's Journal, II, 3.



craving confidence and bottom, takes with any wisdom that is ripe and of long standing. Learned Age and Youth must needs live together. Thoreau used such Eastern sentences as these:

"Perfection is the way of heaven, and to wish for perfection is the duty of man."

"What is philosophy? An entire separation from the world."

"Immemorial custom is transcendent law."

"In style all that is required is that it convey the meaning."

"What the superior man seeks is in himself; What the small man seeks is in others."

One thing more important than sentences Thoreau took from the Orientals; that was not the consciousness of standing "on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment," but something more sincere and vital. Thoreau is probably most interesting for his attitude on practical questions concerning the personal relations. Thoreau's native hatred of philanthropy must have been materially reinforced by contact with what orientalists today hold up to the humanitarian *West*<sup>1</sup> as the "true spirit of charity",<sup>1</sup> the Oriental doctrine of cold benevolence and separation in friendship. He must have relished this sentence which he edited for the Dial in 1843<sup>2</sup>: "Be silent, for I swear by Allah, it were equal to the torments of hell to enter into Paradise through the interest of a neighbor."

Thoreau was better fitted to understand and appropriate the Greek spirit - though <sup>far from</sup> ~~not~~ adequately so - than he was the Oriental spirit. Brought up among persons who knew the value of Greek, and writing in a company (Parker, Fuller, Alcott) which was extraordinar-

1- See editor's note in all the volumes of the "Wisdom of the East" series.

2- IV, 404. - Hermes Trismegistus.





ily proficient in the Greek language,<sup>1</sup> Thoreau could not but take notice of the claims of classical literature upon the modern attention. That he did so with greater zest and to better advantage than his fellows is significant. Sanborn said he read "Latin as readily as English", and "Greek without difficulty."<sup>2</sup> He was a much better scholar, in this as in other fields, than Emerson. Higginson says,<sup>3</sup> "I remember how that fine old classical scholar, the late John Glen King, of Salem, used to delight in Thoreau as being 'the only man who thoroughly loved both Nature and Greek'". Thoreau "never had a good word to say for Plato" - probably because he distrusted the Neo-Platonism of Emerson. But he "read all the Greek poets in the original", says Sanborn,<sup>4</sup> who reproduces a sheet upon which Thoreau drew up in 1843 a long list of Greek (and Latin) writers he proposed to read.

We can scarcely agree that "he was almost a transplanted Greek";<sup>5</sup> he exaggerated wilfully, found Greece and Rome "tame",<sup>6</sup> and had only a fantastic attachment to Athens, raising beans at Walden so as to be a Pythagorean, praising Homer like a wild boy - crediting him with absolute realism and perfect naturalness, and a magic power to describe the morning itself rather than an impression of it. Yet Greece furnished Thoreau <sup>with</sup> a very effective means for discipline in the way of a standard outside himself. Emerson<sup>7</sup> had said in the Dial that the classics gave "the purest pleasure accessible to human nature". Thoreau assured the readers of Walden that "the student may

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1- See Goddard.

2- Personality of Thoreau, 36.

3- Page 30.

4- Personality, 36.

5- Trent, American Literature, 344.

6- The Week.

7- "Landor".



read Homer or Aeschylus in the Greek without danger of dissipation or luxuriousness, for it implies that he in some measure emulate their heroes, and consecrate morning hours to their pages." Besides, Greece was favored by the gods with the gift of perfection; "over Greece hangs the divine necessity, a mellow heaven of itself," he wrote in The Service. There was sufficient exhortation in the Dial to "study their works and learn their methods ----- so select and so true." Emerson was only expressing a general Transcendental conviction when he commended the study of the Greeks to the writer because they "prune his orations and point his pen."<sup>1</sup> All this was no such discipline as Matthew Arnold sought in the classics, was no "fanaticism of moderation" or "intemperance of temperance;" and it can scarcely be said that any of the American Transcendentalists were diligent and patient enough to reap the "high benefit of clearly feeling and deeply enjoying the really excellent." Thoreau spoke of ~~of~~ classical studies as "<sup>composing</sup> ~~composing~~";<sup>2</sup> but genuine composure was not a Transcendental virtue.

"If men read aright, methinks they would never read anything but poems," reads a passage in the Week.<sup>3</sup> Thoreau, who read Chalmers' Poets without skipping, who devoted his college days to working in the mine of old English poetry "with a quiet enthusiasm,"<sup>4</sup> owes more, I think, to the styles and the temperaments of those poets than he owes to any other group of writers. Hardly a page is not reminiscent of one of them.

"Old Chaucer's breadth" taught him that "There is no wisdom which can take the place of humanity;"<sup>5</sup> and Chaucer's clearness and

1- English Traits

2- "Anacreon."

3- P. 86.

4- Pertaining to Thoreau, 131.

5- Journal, I, 301.



raciness were by <sup>no</sup> means lost on Thoreau's style.

Those qualities of Daniel which Edmund Gosse best phrased as "want of passion," "scholarly grace and tender, mournful reverie," were neither lost on Thoreau. The admirable stanza beginning the poem "To the Lady Margaret, Countess of Cumberland:"

"He that of such a height hath built his mind,  
And rear'd the dwelling of his thoughts so strong,  
As neither fear nor hope can shake the frame  
Of his resolved powers; nor all the wind  
Of vanity or malice pierce to wrong  
His settled peace, or to disturb the same;  
What a fair seat hath he, from whence he may  
The boundless wastes and wilds of man survey?"

might have been a text for an essay; he did quote time and again the famous lines from the same poem,

"Unless above himself he can

Erect himself, how poor a thing is man."

He thought "Daniel deserves praise for his moderation," and said, "We can well believe that he was a retired scholar, who would keep himself shut up in his house two whole months together."

Drayton's vigor, independence, ~~(some time early)~~, and realism had a share in the making of Thoreau, though he tried in vain to make certain of his poems charge like Drayton's.

He thought both Donne and Daniel had "strong sense", and respected the former because he had the "patience of a day laborer."<sup>1</sup>

He admired old English tragedy because "it says something", loves "toward some conclusion", "has to do with things", is "down-

<sup>1</sup>- Journal, I, 467.





right and manly," and because its writers "come to the point and do not waste the time."<sup>1</sup>

He had not much patience with the romantic criticism of Shakespeare,<sup>2</sup> believing that the critics obscured his "chief characteristics of reality and unaffected manliness." He quotes often enough from Shakespeare; but did not reverence him as he revered Milton.

Thoreau's favorite, and to us most important resort in old English poetry, was to the religious poets of the seventeenth century, Donne, Vaughan, Crashaw, Quarles, and Herbert. He was genuinely akin to them in temperament, found their themes congenial, and made the most of their metrical example. They were much in favor with the New England Transcendentalists. Emerson was devoted to Herbert from the beginning, and Alcott had only one contemporary in his list of favorite poets - Wordsworth, Milton, Donne, Vaughan, & Crashaw, Herbert, Quarles, and Cowley.<sup>3</sup>

While in the main Thoreau's affinity with these poets was temperamental and spiritual, he admired Quarles only for his metallic qualities of verse and voice, and his eminently sturdy constitution. He found in him "plenty of tough, crooked timber",<sup>4</sup> and wrote in his Journal,<sup>5</sup> "Quarles is never weak or shallow, though coarse and untasteful. He presses able-bodied and strong-backed words into his service, which have a certain rustic fragrance and force, as if now first devoted to literature after having served sincere and stern uses. ----- a right manly accent." Emerson was paying tribute to the Quarles element in Thoreau when he wrote thus of Thoreau's poems in

1- Journal, I, 465.

2- Journal, I, 466.

3- Goddard, 61.

4- Letters, 113.

5- I, 455-9.



his Journal for 1842:<sup>1</sup> "These (poems) of Henry's at least have rude strength, and we do not come to the bottom of the mine. ----- It seems as if the poetry was all written before time was."

In the main Thoreau was drawn by their sober introspection and intense concentration to the seventeenth century religious poets, preferring them on this ground to the Elizabethans. Milton he read always, valuing him "above Shakespeare,"<sup>2</sup> and getting Lycidas by heart,<sup>3</sup> In the others their more morbid and egoistic elements of eccentricity and nervous, crabbed intensity fascinated him. Their poetry was made pretty largely out of the nerves, and Thoreau was not without nerves. He repaired to them for the discipline of their form, but indulged himself in the vehemence of their sentiment. Like them, he could not finish a poem as bravely as he could begin it.

Thoreau probably felt the seventeenth century most through George Herbert, whose almost morbid sensitiveness to details, whose strained simplicity, whose tremulous purity, whose low-voiced passion combined with what Emerson described as his "hard mentality," his "grip and exactitude of mind," and his "mental materialism" to make Thoreau I should say at least one-fourth of what he was. Thoreau has very little to say explicitly about Herbert, just as he had little to say about Emerson, the other prime influence in his life. Emerson and Herbert, I think, - at least the qualities of mind they represented - Thoreau took for granted. He could never weld a poem as wonderful as the worst of Herbert; he was, with difficulty, sweet. But the signs of his vain strivings are many; and the Herbert in him never died. The youth who wrote so tense a line as

1- VI, 304.

2- Sanborn, 287.

3- Salt, 91.



"The air did gently heave,"

and who drew his breath in pain for every line of poetry he tried, did not outgrow that pain, however early he ceased trying to write poetry.

Thoreau seems to have been bent very early towards Herbert. The best poem from his early period, and I think the best of all his poems, Sic Vita, (1837) is unmistakably like the Herbert of "Peace" and "Denial" in every feature - in almost every word.

"I am a parcel of vain strivings tied  
By a chance bond together,  
Dangling this way and that, their links  
Were made so loose and wide,  
Methinks,  
For milder weather.

A bunch of violets without their roots,  
And sorrel intermixed,  
Encircled by a wisp of straw  
Once coiled about their shoots,  
The law  
By which I'm fixed.

A nosegay which Time clutched from out  
Those fair Elysian fields  
With weeds and broken stems, in haste,  
Doth make the rabble rout  
That waste  
The day he yields.





And here I bloom for a short hour unseen,  
Drinking my juices up,  
With no root in the land  
To keep my branches green,  
But stand  
In a bare cup.

Some tender buds were left upon my stem  
In mimicry of life,  
But ah! the children will not know,  
Till time has withered them,  
The wo  
With which they're ripe.

But now I see I was not plucked for naught,  
And after in life's vase  
Of glass set while I might survive,  
But by a kind hand brought  
Alive  
To a strange place.

That stock thus thinned will soon redeem its hours,  
And by another year,  
Such as God knows, with freer air,  
More fruits and fairer flowers  
Will bear,  
While I droop here."

An inferior poem of the next year, called "Friendship" in the Journal,



continues the tradition:-

"I think awhile of Love, and, while I think,  
Love is to me a world,  
Sole meat and sweetest drink,  
And close connecting link  
'Tween heaven and earth.

I only know it is, not how or why,  
My greatest happiness;  
However hard I try,  
Not if I were to die,  
Can I explain.

I fain would ask my friend how it can be,  
But, when the time arrives,  
Then Love is more lovely  
Than anything to me,  
And so I'm dumb.

Hereafter the visible signs of Herbert in Thoreau fade; but the quiet passionate conviction which was the mark of his early style is not extinguished by maturer sarcasm, nor even stung to death by wild-apple tang.

Both conformed; but while Herbert conformed to the "great traditions of Church and State," Thoreau conformed to the will of nature - that is, to himself - and no traditions whatsoever. Thoreau rests in Nature, Herbert in the God of Nature. Herbert is the greater man; but Thoreau is great at all partly because he kneeled to Herbert.

It is interesting to see how Herbert, who is far more real than Izaak Walton made him, shares some of Thoreau's curter qualities.



It would be worth something to know how many of the following sentences from

"Jacula Prudentum;  
Or, Outlandish Proverbs, Sentences, Etc.  
Selected by Mr. George Herbert, Late  
Orator of the University  
of Cambridge"

were seen by Thoreau. Emerson quoted from the list at least once.<sup>1</sup>  
If Thoreau did see them, he took them; for he believed them all.

"God hath oft a great share in a little house."

"The bird loves her nest."

"Noble housekeepers need no doors."

"Mend your clothes, and you may hold out this year."

"He that riseth betimes, hath something in his head."

"Fine dressing is a foul house swept before the doors."

"A fool knows more in his house, than a wise man in another's."

"I had rather ask of my fire brown bread, than borrow of my neighbor white."

"Be what thou wouldst seem to be."

"The wind in one's face makes one wise."

"A little labour, much health."

"He cannot be virtuous that is not vigorous."

"A wise man needs not blush for changing his purpose."

"He that blows in the dust, fills his eyes with it."

"Poverty is the mother of health."

"Who doth his own business, fouls not his hands."

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<sup>1</sup>- Albee, 31.





"The greatest step is that out of doors."

"He carries well, to whom it weighs not."

"He is rich enough that wants nothing."

"We are fools one to another."

"He that lives well, sees afar off."

"Sit in your place, and none can make you rise."

"A man's discontent is his worst evil."

"He is a fool that thinks not that another thinks."

"Many friends in general, one in special."

"They that know one another, salute afar off."

"Give a clown your finger, and he will take your hand!"

"Gossips are frogs, they drink and talk."

"Send a wise man on an errand, and say nothing unto him."

"Who gives to all, denies all."

"He that lives well, is learned enough."



VIII. WRITING

As Thoreau in his reading sought specific sanction for a cloudy philosophy, so in his writing he strove to precipitate the vapor of that philosophy in fixed, crystal drops. His own remark, "The prose writer has conquered like a Roman, and settled colonies", describes his achievement.

"I think Thoreau had always looked forward to authorship as his work in life" said Emerson.<sup>1</sup> Channing thought that "No matter where he might have lived, or in what circumstance, he would have been a writer; he was made for this by all his tendencies of mind and temperament"; and records that "It was a saying of his that he had lived and written as if to live forty years longer; his work was laid out for a long life."

Such testimony establishes his passion. More testimony establishes his good faith. If he had a passion for writing, he had also a passion for writing perfectly. He wrote every day in his Journal for training; and always he devoted his powers to the written page, refusing to strive for any unusual effects in his lecturing.<sup>2</sup> He understood that "nothing goes by luck in composition",<sup>3</sup> and took to heart Carlyle's condemnation of Novalis for not "troubling to express his truth with any laborious accuracy," for "want of rapid energy ---- and ---- the emphasis and resolute force of a man." He hated "palaver" in style, and said he did manual labor in order to avoid it. "Negligence in the author is inexcusable. I know and

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1. Sanborn, IX.

2. Salt. 112.

3. Journal, I, 225.



will know no such thing as haste in composition", Emerson had said in 1838.<sup>1</sup> However much Thoreau said about style's being the man and nothing more, he yet knew perfectly well for the truth what Gibbon observed in his Autobiography: "The style of an author should be the image of his mind, but the choice and command of language is the fruit of exercise". "It is vain to try to write unless you feel strong in the knees", said Thoreau.<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau subscribed to conciseness and individuality in his writing as elsewhere. In 1851 he was reminding himself by a footnote in the Journal,<sup>3</sup>

"My faults are:-

Paradoxes, - saying just the opposite, -

a style which may be imitated,

Ingenious,

Using current phrases and maxims, when I

should speak for myself.

Want of conciseness".

He envied the Greeks because they could "express themselves with more facility than we in distinct and lively images."<sup>4</sup> He hated "wooden and lifeless" words, with "paralysis in their tales," as he hated gossip. He was a good workman, filing much more finely than Emerson took the trouble to file. Channing<sup>5</sup> thought "his facility was truly marvelous; he seemed made for holding a pen between his fingers and getting excellent sentences, where other writers hobble and correct." "Every sentence is the result of a long probation,"

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1. Journal, II, 21.

2. Journal.

3. VII, 7.

4. Journal, I, 116.

5. P. 254.





Thoreau himself said, and "should read as if its author, had he held a plow instead of a pen, could have drawn a furrow deep and straight to the end." He omitted no practicable measures for perfecting his equipment. "Henry Thoreau says he values only the man who goes directly to his needs; who, wanting wood, goes to the woods and brings it home." He worked in much that fashion, and "left nothing undone that could aid him in the preparation of his first books," says Channing.<sup>1</sup> He disciplined himself with Herbert and Quarles, as we saw, and by translating from the classics two dramas of Aeschylus and selections from Homer, Anacreon and Pindar. He "played the sedulous ape" to Johnson, Gray, Goldsmith, Wordsworth, Sir Thomas Browne, Davenant,<sup>2</sup> Herbert, Quarles, Homer, Simonides<sup>3</sup>, Carlyle,<sup>4</sup> Confucius, Bacon,<sup>5</sup> Plutarch,<sup>5</sup> the Indian<sup>6</sup> and the guide-book writer. The most remarkable product of his mimicry is the last paragraph of the chapter called "The Pond in Winter" in Walden, which moves with every token of the gait of Sir Thomas Browne. All in all, Thoreau, if not radiant, writes so satisfactorily that the critic is tempted (and his earlier critics did not in fact resist the temptation) to do nothing but fill his space with quotations; for Thoreau can take the matter in hand away from the bungling expositor and dispatch it forever in a phrase or paragraph that calls for no amendment.

It is not difficult to decide to what school of literary theorists Thoreau belongs. He was a nineteenth century euphuist of the stamp of Flaubert, Stevenson and Pater; he travelled to catch

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1. P. 49.

2. He wrote poems in the measure of "Gondibert."

3. "Smoke."

4. In some of the earlier letters and Journals.

5. The Service.

6. Familiar Letters, P. 13.



consciousness itself in the trap of the specific; he wished to express "himself"; he succeeded in twisting his own constituent threads of writer, man and philosopher so tightly together that it is not easy now to untwine them. "Men are constantly dinging in my ears their fair theories and plausible solutions of the universe, but over there is no help, and I return again to my shoreless, islandless ocean, and fathom unceasingly for a bottom that will hold an anchor."<sup>1</sup>

He believed that if he could come squarely upon his self, and could describe that self exactly, he would be anchored for once and all. His whole literary quest is a quest for a charm by which he could transfer the facts of consciousness - to him as to most men in the nineteenth century the only reality - to the printed page. He "watched his moods ---- as narrowly as a cat does a mouse,"<sup>2</sup> he said. "He had as touchstone for authors their degree of ability to deal with supersensual facts and feeling with scientific precision and dignity," Conway tells us.<sup>3</sup> For him "thought" meant "impression," and "impression" meant "reality." He considered that he should have come nearest reality when he had "kinked and knotted his impressions into "something hard and significant, which you could swallow like a diamond, without digesting".<sup>4</sup> He wished his "life" to go into his books, and is alarmed in 1840<sup>5</sup> when he considers "how little I am actually concerned about the things I write in my journal." He wished his books to present an absolutely new front of life, a new

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1- Journal, I, 54.

2- Somewhere in the Journal. I cannot find the place again.

3- Fraser's.

4- Journal, II, 418.

5- Journal, I, 143.



kind of reality - his own life, and his own "reality." "If you can write what you will never read, you have done rare things", he said in the Week.<sup>1</sup> He was zealous in the cause of expressing particular - and so for him the only genuine - impressions; he has much to say to that man who can see no difference between one green field and another. He could not find "in any literature, whether ancient or modern, any adequate account of that Nature with which I am acquainted."<sup>2</sup> He comes nearest perhaps to convincing us of what we are steadfastly reluctant to believe - that there is anything new under the sun, anything "behind" Shakespeare and Euripides - in such a passage as this impeccable one from The Maine Woods<sup>3</sup>: "Once, when Joe (the Indian guide) had called again, and we were listening for moose, we heard, come faintly echoing, or creeping from afar, through the moss-clad aisles, a dull, dry, rushing sound, with a solid core to it, yet as if half-smothered under the grasp of the luxuriant and fungus-like forest, like the shutting of a door in some distant entry of the damp and shaggy wilderness. If we had not been there, no mortal had heard it. When we asked Joe in a whisper what it was, he answered, - "Tree fall."<sup>4</sup>

Thoreau is definitely related to the <sup>prose</sup> "school of the particular", perhaps in the capacity of ~~founder and~~ pioneer, through his influence upon Stevenson. There is no question that Stevenson took incalculably much from Thoreau. The very first sentence of The Service would have done, as far as tone is concerned, for the first sentence of Aes Triplex. The Week reminds one of the Inland Voyage in the first

1- P. 333.

2- Journal, II, 152.

3- P. 113. Quoted by Paul Elmer More in his "Hermit's Notes."





paragraph and on almost every page thereafter. The trick of defining an impression by bringing another impression smartly alongside - "it as if the beasts spoke."<sup>1</sup> - Stevenson probably learned in the pages of Thoreau. Had he not been fascinated by the man himself, his judgments upon him could not have been as trenchant and subtle as they were. He thought Thoreau at least manly always; and told someone in an enthusiastic moment that he supposed he had never written ten words after he had once read Thoreau which would not recall him.

Thoreau, isolated in America, did not end his literary career as happily as did Flaubert, Stevenson, and Pater theirs. Fatally & committed to "sphericity," always, unfortunately, conscious of "eternity and space gambolling familiarly through my depths,"<sup>2</sup> he had not the means of improving and disciplining his native genius for the specific which Pater had in his intellectual ideal of beauty and his better understanding of the Greek feeling that "The half yields greater satisfaction to the spirit than the whole." So that while the Greeks could "prune his orations and point his pen", and do somewhat to give him "bottom, endurance, wind,"<sup>3</sup> they never gave Thoreau to understand that consciousness itself needs the curb. He soon forgot to translate from the Greek, he soon forgot to discipline his prose by exercising in verse, and fell into the grasp of as relentless a demon of romantic composition as is anywhere to be seen in literature. "His literary art", says Burroughs,<sup>4</sup> "was to let fly with a kind of quick inspiration". He tells us himself in the Journal

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1- Thoreau on Whitman.

2- Journal, I, 54.

3- Emerson, English Traits.

4- The critic. Mar. 26, 1881.



that the theme seeks him, not he it; that he "fears no intemperance" but is prepared to "drain the cup of inspiration to its last dregs"; that he is ambitious to "take as many bounds in a day as possible." He did take more and more extravagant bounds as his Journal grew older, believing implicitly that his natural mind was inexhaustible, welcoming any impression that was sharp and vivid, "improving every opportunity to express himself as if it were the last", making the most of every fancy lest if rejected it prove to have been important, piling up examples and talking all around a subject in hopes of getting to it "naturally". As he grew more desperate in his pursuit of the one germ at last which when swallowed would expand him indefinitely, he grew more incoherent in his self-expression. The style and the self dissipated together. Perhaps a commission from the demon to labor ten years on a work like Marius the Epicurean was what he the writer stood in need of, he the diamond, disintegrating in his brave vacuum on the stern and rock-bound coast of New England.



IX. HYPOSTASIS.

It is very specifically that Thoreau tells us he inhabits a vacuum, and it is very adroitly that he defends his choice of habitation; it is in spite of himself that his extravagant example proves better than almost any other the ultimate futility of all living in a vacuum. Perhaps it is in spite of himself that many a page of the Journal betrays a private sense of bewilderment and disappointment. His half-expressed pain when friends disappear, and his confessions of growing impotence in sphericity both are instruments in that betrayal; the genuine vacuum is sua natura self-satisfied, and lacks even rudimentary organs of remorse. At any rate, his very clear pronouncements on the subject, and his most relentless pursuit of its essence, make him a very satisfactory figure in which to observe its bearings and its consequences.

"Tell Shakespeare to attend some leisure hour,

For now I've business with this drop of dew",

says Thoreau. We too have business with the drop of dew.

Within his vacuum Thoreau was to become perfect with the least difficulty, was to be reborn into the Universe with the slightest travail. He was to be all that Man can be, at once and forever. There he was to find Reality and keep him for a companion. By taking thought he was to achieve absolute glory. And all would be very easy. "The brave man braves nothing", he boasted in The Service. "What a hero one can be without moving a finger!" "Not having anything to do, to do something."<sup>1</sup> To be a real man - how extremely simple, if only one has courage to slough responsibility!

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<sup>1</sup> Sanborn, Seventy years, 426.





Intellectual perfection was easily within reach. "One may have many thoughts and not decide anything", decided Thoreau. One had only to knock the bottom out of his consciousness to know how unfathomably profound he was. One had only to withdraw into a dark corner to witness how pure-white was the flame of his thought.

Moral perfection was even a simpler matter in vacuo. Emerson had thrown out the disconcerting statement in "The Transcendentalist", "We have yet no man who has leaned entirely upon his character". Thoreau could do that easily enough. All he needed to do was to "rise above the necessity of virtue",<sup>1</sup> so that his vices would "necessarily trail behind",<sup>2</sup> and to facilitate the operation of the will by removing all the occasions for exercising it. He could not but be perfect when he was above having to be tested. He could solve any ethical problem in his vacuum - as H. G. Wells does in his Utopias - absolutely to his satisfaction. The normal vacuum is stuffed with satisfaction.

Yet the vacuum, we have seen apropos of friendship, sphericity, nature, and authorship, did not contain unalloyed satisfaction for Thoreau. In some degree he came to suspect that he was distilling the essence not out of all life, but ~~just~~ out of his vacuum; in short that no vacuum can contain any life at all.

What it did contain was the music of a telegraph wire and Thoreau's own "infinite din within";<sup>3</sup> a dreamy confusion of art with spirit, and a fruitless confounding of all spiritual values. "Simplify, simplify!" cried Thoreau in Walden. In his vacuum he simplified

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1- The Week, 374.

2- Letters, 173.

3- Journal.



the meaning of the soul until it became equivalent to the sensation of expansion, equivalent to the reminder (from anywhere) "that there were higher, infinitely higher, planes of life which it behooved me never to forget."<sup>1</sup> That sensation and that reminder he demanded infinite room to indulge and harken for. No other mortal could be near; only the universe, the equivalent of self, was to attend. A real spiritual existence was at stake. [The duty of the self was to comprehend reality; reality was to be found only in the whole - the universe; therefore the duty of the individual was to betake himself where the universe in reality was. But the self by its own nature was fitted not only for comprehending the universe, but for being the universe as well; so that to be ones self was the only legitimate aspiration of man. To magnify the self, to have sensations of infinitude, to thrum with the excitement of the universe, was the ambition of the man who went to Walden Pond.]

Thoreau speaks in the Journal some thirty times of the excitement which the humming of a telegraph wire caused within him. "He thought the best of music was in single strains", said Emerson; a single strain of music was for him that "finest strain that a human ear can hear" which is to remind one of the "higher, infinitely higher planes" of self.<sup>2</sup> "The laws of Nature break the rules of Art"; the telegraph wire told him more about himself - brought the universe closer around him - than the noblest symphony. For Symphonies, being civilized, presuppose rules and intelligence, while the telegraph wire - "When we listen to it we are so wise that we need not to know."<sup>3</sup>

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1- Journal, II, 497.

2- Journal, II, 496.

3- The Service, 13.



The telegraph wire, which Thoreau does not mention after 1854 (probably because he thought he had exhausted its meaning) had been significant to him because it had seemed intensely spiritual. It had concentrated into a single strain the meaning of the universe, had furnished him at no expense (at no cost of "life") the entire spiritual stock which it is possible for man to accumulate. Such a conception of spiritual values - such preoccupation with a drop of dew - again bids Shakespeare wait.

If Thoreau lost faith in the telegraph wire, he never ceased to believe what Emerson had spent his life preaching: that "spirit" is a single fact, that the soul has a single voice, that all spiritual values are indistinguishably blended in one experience - Inspiration. Any sort of inspiration suffices; the exaltation is the thing; man should be ready to be anything, in the ecstasy of being stimulated. Thoreau never lost faith, I say, as Emerson never did, in this Inspiration, this facile monopoly of spiritual privileges.

Thoreau seems to have come to realize the paralysis inherent in his romantic theory of music; he never noticed that his avenue of Inspiration was a blind alley. He never acknowledged that Emersonian optimism is hopeless optimism as surely as scientific determination is hopeless pessimism. "Necessity", he said, meaning the natural inspiration of the senses, is "a mellow heaven in itself." From that standpoint, church and state and law can be combined in one man's self;<sup>1</sup> "the intellect and moral sentiment are unanimous";<sup>2</sup> spirit, mind, body, moral nature are one; man, thinker, and writer are one; science, art, ethics are fused. Thoreau fuses his values

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1- Channing. 342.

2- Emerson, "Montaigne".





with high complacency. He was not dismayed at Walden to surprise two instincts in himself, one of savagery and the other of spirituality. "Cold and damp" were "as rich experience as warmth and dryness".<sup>1</sup> The universe was his "only sanctum sanctorum",<sup>2</sup> himself his only temple. He proposed<sup>3</sup> to

"Find out heaven  
By not knowing hell."

God was any manifestation of spirit. "I say God, I am not sure that that is the name. You will know whom I mean", he wrote to Harrison Blake.<sup>4</sup>

Surely man is whirling forever on Ixion's wheel when his will is the will of the universe, when thought and feeling in him are indistinguishable, when soul and body are one, when faith is intellect, when necessity is sweet, when good and evil are dissolved and no longer present to the touch, and when the individual is dissolved in the universal. The forest philosophy of India was guilty of no such confusion, says Mr. More,<sup>5</sup> but distinguished between the universe and the man; held up the former for the latter to grow by wondering at, but never lost sight of the latter's individual responsibilities. That Thoreau and Emerson were at ease on the wheel their lives long, does not establish their monism in eternity. That a later generation has broken loose from the wheel establishes its inhumanity.

The monster which pursued Thoreau was akin to many a monster that pursued many a philosopher during the nineteenth century; it

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1- Week, 303.

2- "Persius".

3- Journal, I, 404.

4- 1850 .

5- Shelburne Essays, vol. VI, essay L.



was an abstraction hypostatized. During that century, the seed-time of the modern social soul, when the sun withheld its warmth and suffered growing-pains, abstractions seemed blessed beyond all other commodities because they held out most promise of nourishment, of hope for the solution of the secret of life. When nine-tenths of life seemed flowing away, men were wont to seek refuge on the island of an abstraction. When mind and heart and soul were being explained away, men doggedly identified themselves with certain qualities of *maintained that nothing else was real in the world,* the mind and heart and soul, and demanded immunity *from extinction.*

"Elsewhere the world may change, but oh! not here!" they cried, like A. C. Benson.<sup>1</sup> Hallowing abstractions in the face of doubt, clutching at phenomena of consciousness in the face of science they preached and lived vehemently all their lives what their private reason perhaps from the first condemned as inadequate and provincial. "Work", "Art", "Happiness", "Beauty", "Inspiration", "Reality" rode the century relentlessly. Belief was adequate if sincere and passionate. Men lived fully enough if they represented some quality or aspect of human nature to the consistent exclusion of other aspects and qualities; if they were gripped and warped by a concept or stamped in an attitude, and forgot all else. Men of that time are not so much men as faculties - not so much individual human beings as individual forces. Carlyle is a universe in miniature, "creating, groaning, tortuous". Coleridge, says Sir Walter Scott, is "a lump of coal rich with gas, which lies expending itself in puffs and gleams, unless some shrewd body will clap it into a cast-iron box, and compel the compressed element to do itself justice." Byron is an angry, glowing cheek. Keats is an odor hanging heavily close to

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<sup>1</sup>- "Peace".



the earth. Shelley is a mad luminous bird who would fly higher than is possible. Wordsworth is a column of white mist moving among the hills. Ruskin is a swift fevered river. Emerson is an electric wire snapping and emitting brilliant, cold sparks. Thoreau is a pard-like hunter, moving quietly whither he likes and refusing to be touched.

Thoreau is the most deliberate hypostatizer of all. Born into a philosophical school whose ideas were already well formed, younger by ten years than most of its adherents,<sup>1</sup> and with a craftsman's mind for visualizing details, it is no wonder that he, most scrupulously of all men in America or Europe, should have assumed to be real, and attempted to live, the generalizations of Goethe and the abstractions of the transcendental philosophy. Nor is it surprising that, with his passion for the specific, he should have hypostatized a little more strenuously than he did such abstractions as Character, Will, Spirit, Moral Nature of Man, Life, Self, Thought, Unity, Trust, Freedom, Mastery of Circumstances, Improvement, Individual Rights, the Present, Circles, - that he should have hypostatized more strenuously than he did those abstractions, the quality of "Reality." The hypostatizing of Reality is the simplest of everyday occurrences. Children personify Reality, and countrymen fancy that "real" life is to be found in cities. The man who went out wolfishly to "live deep and suck out ~~a~~ all the marrow of life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and

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1- Emerson was 15 years older.

Alcott	"	18	"	"
Fuller	"	7	"	"
Parker	"	7	"	"
Channing	"	27	"	"
Hawthorne	"	13	"	"





reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world", leaves no one doubting that the monster which pursued him was Reality hypostatized into life and turned loose upon him. Reality and his pardlike hunter - these make up "the Thoreau".

That Thoreau was destined for bewilderment and defeat would be obvious; and has been in a measure shown. His Christian-Science optimism was false because it argued from the fact that man possesses a "moral nature" to the conclusion that all men and all things are altogether good; his conviction that a man can possess the incredible glories of an evening sky because he can admire them is false; neither of those errors is easier to expose than is his illusion that reality can be hunted down and appropriated because it can be conceived.

Thoreau's whole life was a search for embodied reality, and his whole contention on paper is that reality is accessible. "How to live, how to get the most life, how to extract the honey from the flower ~~of~~ the world. That is my every-day business. I am as busy as a bee about it", is not the only passage of its kind in the Journal. "Be it life or death", he adds, "we crave only reality". He is confident that "there is a solid bottom everywhere" if we only have the courage to sink to it. He is confident that there is a reality somewhere away from circumstances.

When Thoreau says he is seeking "what was always and always must be because it really is now", we can speculate upon the probability of his success. We can guess that he will look nowhere outside himself for "what really is now". If he finds his self, he finds reality. If he finds reality, he has found the universe. "It is only he", said Confucius,<sup>1</sup> "in the world, who possesses absolute

<sup>1</sup> - The Conduct of Life - (Wisdom of the East Series) p. 45.



truth who can get to the bottom of the law of his being. He who is able to get to the bottom of the law of his being will be able to get to the bottom of the law of being of other men. He who is able to get to the bottom of the law of being of men will be able to get to the bottom of the laws of physical nature. He who is able to get to the bottom of the laws of physical nature will be able to influence the forces of creation of the Universe. He who can influence the forces of creation of the Universe is one with the Powers of the Universe". But Thoreau never gets to the bottom of the law of his being because he does not recognize his individual being as in any way distinguishable from the universal being. He probes for the bottom of his being in Walden Pond, before he has taken the trouble to be anything away from Walden Pond. He hopes to find what his self is like absolutely apart from relationships. He hypostatizes "self", and so loses it. Like the secret of harmony, it "always retreats as I advance";<sup>1</sup> and all he can do is follow helplessly - a nothing in search of a something; a nothing perpetually dividing itself into a something and getting infinity. The problem of self, like the problem of love, is his sore affliction; "There is no remedy for love but to love more", said he.<sup>2</sup> So with being; there is no remedy for being but to be infinitely more - of nothing. So with his ethics as well. Hypostatizing "moral nature", he gives himself to understand that there is no bad in him, and lets his goodness, whatever and wherever that be, flow. The only remedy for being good is to be indefinitely better.

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1- Journal, I, 321.

2- Journal, I, 88.



That Thoreau did not grow dizzy on this Ixion's wheel is to be ascribed to the novelty and exhilaration of the experiment. <sup>ourselves</sup> We <sup>1</sup> grow dizzy once we begin to whirl. We bring human nature with us another time to plead with the keeper of the wheel for our release.

Thoreau never leaves the wheel because he never ceases to be extravagant. "I desire to speak somewhere without bounds", he says; "for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression. ---- No truth, we think, was ever expressed but with this sort of emphasis, that for the time there seemed to be no other". But we may be sure that if he had known any other truth than his doctrine of reality he would have allowed it to temper what he said. The whole would have been his <sup>the particular</sup> "truth" then as <sup>had been</sup> before. <sup>1</sup>

There is, of course, an abundance of other truth. Human nature brings forward its <sup>claim for</sup> ~~cause of~~ complete development in harmony, and Matthew Arnold brings forward culture, to demonstrate how mean a compartment of human life Thoreau after all was competent to occupy. Cicero remarks<sup>1</sup> that "all the virtues of a virtuous man are tempered by a certain moderation". Plato <sup>established</sup> ~~is~~ that temperance belongs in human nature. Stevenson suggests that - "The world's heroes have room for all positive qualities, even those which are disreputable, in the capacious theatre of their dispositions. Such can live many lives, while a Thoreau can live but one, and that only with perpetual foresight". Arnold reminds Thoreau that he is not reasonable. <sup>it is who</sup> Arnold <sup>1</sup> makes <sup>the nearest</sup> a thrust at all hypostatizing, thus:<sup>2</sup> "The blundering to be found in the world comes from people fancying that some idea is a definite and ascertained thing, like the idea of a triangle, when it

1- Pro Murena

2- Literature and Dogma, 6.





is not". Arnold makes us understand that the history of Thoreau's adventures in sphericity, in friendship, and in nature, is only the tragic history of a "little private darkness" which is illuminating only as a bad example is illuminating. "Right reason", finally, points out that Thoreau's shocking extremes of independence were altogether futile; that it is not at all necessary to put on armor against society to preserve a very rigorous independence, and that his self-improvement was only self-defeat.

Culture does this much; but does more. We need not fear Thoreau's example in society. The "instinct of self-preservation in humanity", and the common capacity for humor, bring it about, of course, that Walden is not taken literally. What we may do now is not to object that life holds more than Thoreau describes, but to measure how much of human nature he does faithfully represent.



X. SIGNIFICANCE.

Whitman once said to Traubel<sup>1</sup>: "I asked Sanborn who of all men of Concord was most likely to last into the future. Sanborn took his time in replying. I thought he was going to say Emerson, but he didn't. He said Thoreau. I was surprised - looked at him-- asked: 'Is that your deliberate judgment?' and he said very emphatically: 'Yes!' I thought that very significant considering who Emerson was, Thoreau was, Sanborn was, very, very, significant." It is significant that others than Sanborn ~~born~~ today predict longer life for Thoreau than for Emerson; significant not so much in regard to Emerson as in regard to Thoreau; indicating not that Emerson is dying but that Thoreau is beginning to live. "Who shall presume to say the world did not get the best there was in Thoreau?" asks John Burroughs. The world is just beginning to know what it got in the best there was in Thoreau.

The best of Thoreau is not his Transcendentalism, his "little private darkness"; is not his "exposition of the elementary;"<sup>2</sup> is not his association with a very provincial literary school which "did not know enough;" is not his message taken literally. He tells us he is crowing to wake us up, but does not explain what it is he is waking us up to; "character without culture" - character in vacuo - "is something raw, blind, and dangerous," says Matthew Arnold. Today the best man does not exaggerate. Today the thinking man does not ride a metaphysical steed into fog and forest without first learning the way. It is easy enough to point out that Thoreau might have read on further in the fifth Satire of <sup>Persius</sup> ~~exiles~~ and found this to dash

1-Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 213.

2-Brownell, Victorian Prose Masters. "Carlyle."



his enthusiasm for freedom: "A dog may snap its chain with an effort, but as it runs away, it has a good length of iron trailing from its neck." It is easy enough to lead him back to a sentence in Emerson himself which condemns his eccentricity:<sup>1</sup>"It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." It is no trick at all to "treat Thoreau as a text for homilies"<sup>2</sup> and derive humanitarian lessons from his solitude. It is more creditable and more civilized than all this to see what of value Thoreau has to communicate to contemporary and future life in America and in the world.

If read as scripture (as his friends read him) or as mad man (as Lowell read him) he will yield nothing. He cannot be taken literally any more than a wild odor can be seized and kept. "I am permitted to be rash," he said in the Week.<sup>3</sup> It is his temper which must be needed and felt, and not his vagaries that need be worshipped or excused. "The world likes a good hater and refuses almost as much as it likes a good lover and accepter," says John Burroughs. Men ~~be~~ need to be pricked; men need to be made mad on occasions. Men need his temper in the atmosphere as much as they need the flavor of wild apples in their memories: "These apples," he says,<sup>4</sup> "have hung in the wind and frost and rain till they ~~have~~ absorbed the qualities of the weather or season, and thus are highly seasoned, and they pierce and sting and permeate us with their spirit." Yet his sting is far from venomous. "I would give up most other things to be so good a man as Thoreau," wrote Stevenson to Japp when the latter ~~complained of~~ <sup>was hurt by</sup>

1- "Self-Reliance."

2- Trent, American Literature, 340-1.

3- P. 296.

4- Wild Apples."





his criticism. "The man of soft and slippery make-up" will always do well to look at Thoreau.

The best there is in Thoreau is not in the naturalist part of him. Emerson<sup>1</sup> predicted that the example of his usefulness would lead to the creation of a "profession" of naturalist: "I think we must have one day a naturalist in each village as invariably as a lawyer or doctor ---- all questions answered for stipulated fees." But Thoreau the philosopher of human relationships<sup>†</sup>, talking of virtue and friendship and charity and self, will be remembered when Thoreau the visitor of wild-flowers will beg for notice.

It has even come about now that grave sociologists recognize the claims of his position to consideration. For his position is absolutely clear; if he is more interesting than most of the Transcendentalists it is because he denied familiar things, and did not assert monstrosities. One sociologist<sup>2</sup> has defended him, and maintained that he "shows a just notion of the relation between the individual and society, privacy and publicity. There is, in fact, a great deal of sound sociology in Thoreau."

No philosophical criticism of Thoreau's individualism can take the tonic out of his pages or the temper out of his independence. It can be shown that he was unreasonable, and hypostatized "self;" but he still stands alone, halfway enviable in his loneliness. The "Good heart, weak head" of Emerson<sup>3</sup> furnishes a perpetual text for Thoreau. The steadfast air of <sup>the</sup> his chapter on Philanthropy in Walden should alone preserve his name. An extreme example of self-satisfaction can do no harm in the twentieth century. If Thoreau seems "all

1- Journal, VIII, 131.

2- Cooley: Human Nature and the Social Order.  
: Social Organization.

3- Mr. Woodbury.



improved and sharpened to a point",<sup>1</sup> that example in itself is not a bad one. As long as individual excellence is prized by however slight a minority, his books will be "instructive", says Lowell, "as showing how considerable a crop may be raised on a comparatively narrow range of mind, and how much a man may make of his life if he will assiduously follow it, though perhaps never really finding it at last." Thoreau is one of the neatest and most telling arguments for maintaining that "circle of individual privileges" which the political economist talks of. A spirit which

"never gives;

But though the whole world turn to coal,

Then chiefly lives,"

is worth preserving in any civilization.<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau will be found a very satisfactory spokesman for one who feels driven today into a position somewhat analagous to his position in 1850. Not only is he a wholesome shocking force in the lives of young people who have been brought up too exclusively on positivistic and humanitarian principles; he stands pretty staunchly back of one when one desires to strike back at the pragmatist, with his "stimulus," his "interests", his "conditions", and his "social criterion,"<sup>when one desires</sup> to assert that man can be as good as he likes in defiance of circumstances, and<sup>when one desires</sup> to answer, "We do not believe you. Man is great!" That Thoreau's reaction was unreasonable, and that his refuge was in an instinct ("immemorial custom" and "transcendent law") as objectionable as the socialistic instinct, does not cripple

1- Stevenson.

2- Thoreau's poem "Prayer" was printed in 1915 in the Chicago Herald in a department of "well-known poems."



his support when it is necessary that one be unreasonable. One can be as combative and as assertive today as Thoreau was in his day; one still "finds it difficult to make a sufficiently moderate statement,"<sup>1</sup> one still finds it hard to resist the temptation to retort with paradox, when in the presence of a humanitarian, scientific, pragmatic, or any bore. One is tempted today, too, to deny everything except his own notion of what is essential in life - to defy efficiency, charlatanism, and short-sighted handling of the affairs of men. "His protest is needed now" said a writer in the New York Nation in 1902<sup>2</sup>, "much more than it was when he first uttered it, and one would gladly be assured that the increasing interest in his writings means that his teachings are being taken seriously to heart by a great many people."

Thoreau, finally, is a "classic". He will always appeal to "confirmed city-men"<sup>3</sup> like any good book, and not merely to a crowd of naturalists like any eccentric phenomenon (as Lowell seems to have assumed). For the same reason that Robinson Crusoe appeals most to landfolk, Walden will appeal more and more to the men and women of "institutions", to men in studies and clubs, to boys by the fireside in winter. He is eminently a citizen of the republic of letters, and continues some excellent traditions. "Even his love of Nature seems of the intellectual order", Whitman said to Traubel<sup>4</sup> " - the bookish, library, fireside - rather than smacking of out of doors. This is not the general view; it is my view. ---- I only mean to say that while I have no distrust of Thoreau I often find myself catching a

1- Journal, VI, 165.

2- November 13.

3- Vincent, 333.

4- I, 231.





literary scent off his phrases." The readers of Walden will not distrust it because it is literary; they will treasure it - one cannot say how long - because it is literary, <sup>and</sup> ~~because it is~~ a classic. Higginson in 1879 thought Walden "the only book yet written in America that bears an annual perusal," and remarked that for his own part, with Walden in his hands, he could wish "that every other author in America might try the experiment of two years in a shanty<sup>1</sup>."

As almost everyone has been ambitious to be a second Robinson Crusoe, so a few spirits (perhaps more than confess it) will always be furtively suspecting that by two years in the woods they could do themselves some service. Crusoe and Walden, classics of solitude, we cannot do without.

"No <sup>wo</sup> ~~truer~~ American existed than Thoreau", said Emerson. At least <sup>A</sup> more sensible representative of the older New England exists, it seems safe to say. And it is probably true that the spirit of Thoreau through Walden has pervaded the American consciousness, stiffened the American lip, steadied the American nerve <sup>in a ponderable</sup> ~~to a considerable~~ <sup>1</sup> ~~degree~~ <sup>able</sup> degree. Walden is much more a book for the American people than Leaves of Grass is. Thoreau, <sup>cynic</sup> ~~hating~~ society, talks to individual Americans about things they know and may wish to do; and by creating a classic image of the <sup>A</sup> hermit in ideal solitude furnishes the people with the spirit and will for social criticism. Whitman, doting on society, talks about society to himself; does not address any individual - recognizes no individual; creates no image which people can visualize. Thoreau probes his subject; Whitman sprawls over his. Whitman with his infinite, enveloping effort, has not



yet caught the ear of the Americans, may never do so; and it is questionable whether he will have anything to say in the event he does. Thoreau, speaking from his solitude, has entered their ~~then~~ thoughts, sharpened their visions, and made them critics <sup>of</sup> their own sentiments. For that, and for more of it to come, the American X people will be more and more grateful.



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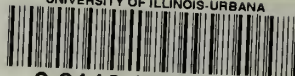








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